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THE SPECTATOR

The great pretender

Fraser Nelson and Douglas Murray on Sturgeon's independence bluff



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Welcome signs

While the EU's former chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier has no formal role in devising the bloc's immigration policy, his words this week have turned much of the Brexit debate on its head. In an interview on French television, he said that France should suspend non-EU immigration for three to five years — with the exception of students and refugees — and that the EU needed to toughen external borders that have become a 'sieve'.

Had those words come from the mouth of Nigel Farage, he would have been excoriated, not least by Barnier himself. How can any country (let alone a continent) manage in the modern world while shutting itself off to people from, say, India, Australia and America? But Britain found itself in a similar situation before Brexit, deporting American violinists because they did not earn enough — while accepting anyone from any EU member state without exception. This systematic discrimination against non-European immigrants was indefensible.

Brexit was not a drawbridge-up moment. It was a means of better managing globalisation, in a way that carries more democratic consent. Most of the world's countries have control over their borders; when voters chose to retrieve this control by leaving the EU it was hardly an extreme act. Britain is now fast-tracking the immigration of highly skilled workers from around the world as part of a new, fairer, points-based immigration system that better fits our strong links with the Indian subcontinent and Australasia. David Cameron's plan to limit net migration to 100,000 a year has thankfully been abandoned.

For obvious reasons, this new points-based system has not yet had a chance to be tested. It has been introduced into a world of travel bans and quarantine, in which it is hard enough to plan a holiday, let alone an

international move. Britain's new migration deal with India — which creates opportunities for skilled Indians to work in the UK while simultaneously bringing in powers to tackle illegal migration — was agreed in the same week that India had to be put on the 'red list', meaning almost all travel between the two countries is banned. But when the deal does come properly into effect, it will honour a promise made by the Prime Minister during the Brexit campaign and afterwards: to make the immigration system fairer, treating all foreign workers equally, wherever in the world they come from.

The hiatus in globalisation caused by the pandemic, however, could serve a useful

The Prime Minister has the chance to make this country a gateway to the world's talent

purpose. Employers are complaining about labour shortages, which is a headache for them but good for wider society. It forces companies to ask whether they really should be looking abroad to recruit — or whether they could be doing more to train up people already here. To look to, say, Gdańsk for an electrician may sometimes be the quickest and easiest option, but it might not always be the best. Take the trouble to recruit and train an apprentice locally and you might find you have a longer-term employee.

Mass immigration has brought Britain a great many benefits. A quarter of all British children have a foreign-born mother. We have established ourselves as the most successful melting pot in Europe. But this system has also risked weakening the link between economic growth and the training and education of young people.

When international travel returns to normal, hopefully we will have a fairer and

more balanced labour market. And hopefully we will also have a migration system that encourages students to come to study in Britain (an export industry, because it is the direction of the flow of money that matters), but which also deals with illegal migrants more quickly and efficiently.

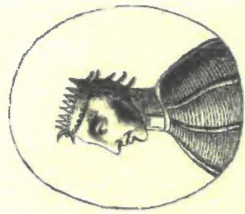
As for asylum seekers who cross the border from a safe country such as France, it is right that the government makes clear they will be deported. To do anything else risks encouraging the people-trafficking business, which has lured thousands to their deaths — mostly in the Mediterranean, but increasingly in the English Channel too.

When Boris Johnson was foreign secretary he coined the phrase 'global Britain', which was a strong symbol for our post-Brexit world. He now has the opportunity to welcome the kinds of immigrants that Barnier would seek to exclude from Europe, but to do so in a way that will create a more balanced economic recovery. If blue-collar workers see their wages rise as a result, we can expect plenty of complaints from employers. But it would bring a huge social benefit: manual labour has been too cheap for too long. This is why so many workers voted for Brexit — and for Johnson.

At a time when culture wars engulf so much of the world, the Prime Minister has a strong opportunity to set a new model of globalisation: going easy on low-paid, low-skilled migration but making Britain a gateway to the world's talent. Immigration is a tricky subject to get right — to balance the needs of employers and employees to be firm without being harsh, to be welcoming without inviting large numbers of migrants who will be unable to support themselves. But the UK's new migration system, though not yet properly tested, is the right approach. Michel Barnier's suggestion is very much not.



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Cover by Morten Morland. Drawings by Michael Heath, Castro, Phil Disley, Tim Bales, Robert Thompson, Bernie, RGE, Nick Newman, Kipper Williams, Dredge, K.L.I. Amb, Wilbur. www.spectator.co.uk Editorial and advertising: The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP; Tel: 020 7961 0200, Fax: 020 7681 3773, Email: letters@spectator.co.uk (for publication); advertising@spectator.co.uk (advertising); Advertising enquiries: 020 7961 0128. Subscription and delivery queries: Spectator Subscriptions Dept., 17 Perrymount Rd, Haywards Heath RH16 3DH; Tel: 0330 3330 000; Email: customerhelp@subscriptions.spectator.co.uk; Rates for a basic annual subscription in the UK: £111; Europe: £185; Australia: A\$279; New Zealand: A\$349; and £195 in all other countries. To order, go to www.spectator.co.uk/A263A or call 0330 3330 080 and quote A151A. Newsagent queries: Spectator Circulation Dept., 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP; Tel: 020 7961 0200, Fax: 020 7681 3773, Email: cbrown@spectator.co.uk; Distributor: Marketforce, 161 Marsh Wall, London, E14 9AP; Tel: 0203 787 9001, www.marketforce.co.uk Vol 344; no 10,055 © The Spectator (1828) Ltd. ISSN 0038-6952. The Spectator is published weekly by The Spectator (1828) Ltd at 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP.



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Emily Hill, who defends her rural relatives' aversion to hugging on p20, is the author of the short story collection *Bad Romance*.

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Alex Burghart examines the history of how England developed from various warring kingdoms into a united country on p32. He has been the MP for Brentwood and Ongar since 2017.

Adam Begley looks at the stories of New York on p34. He has written biographies of John Updike, Harry Houdini and French photographer Nadar.

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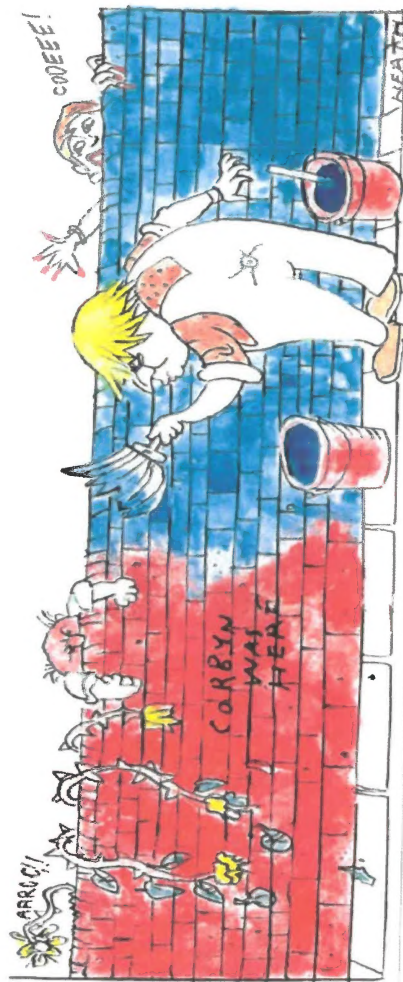
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PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK



Home

A new complexion of British politics was revealed by the capture of Hartlepool by Jill Mortimer for the Conservatives in a by-election, with 15,529 to the Labour candidate's 8,589. Since its formation in 1974, the constituency had been Labour. Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour leader, said his party had 'lost the trust of working people, particularly in places like Hartlepool'. The Conservative Ben Houchen was re-elected as mayor of the Tees Valley with 72.8 per cent of the vote. Of 143 English council seats, the Conservatives now control 63, 13 more than before, with 2,345 councillors; Labour lost control of eight councils to end up with 44, and 1,345 councillors. Sir Keir then made a batch of a shadow cabinet shuffle. He sacked Angela Rayner as party chairman, but could not remove her as deputy leader, since she had been elected by the party. He asked her to shadow Michael Gove at the Cabinet Office in place of Rachel Reeves, who became shadow chancellor in place of Annaliese Dodds, who became party chairman in place of Angela Rayner.

The Scottish National party won 64 seats in the Scottish parliament, one more than before but one short of a majority; the Conservatives won 31, as before, and Labour 22, two fewer. Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister and SNP leader, said that 'it is the will of the country' to hold a referendum on independence. Alex Salmond failed to win a seat and his new party Alba polled 1.7 per cent of the vote. In Wales, Labour increased its seats in the

Snedd by one to 30 out of the total of 60. Ten people shot dead in west Belfast over three days in August 1971 were 'entirely innocent', a coroner ruled; the British Army was found responsible for nine of the deaths.

The Queen, not wearing a mask, opened parliament and read her speech to 34 people and the crown on a cushion in the Lords Chamber. It contained no provisions for social care, but mentioned 30 bills to variously scrap the fixed five-year period between general elections, make voters prove their identity, reduce tax for companies in free ports, build a high-speed railway from Crewe to Manchester, and put the Armed Forces Covenant into law, require tech companies to deal with harmful online content, promote free speech at universities, microchip cats and oblige people to be kind to snakes. By the beginning of the week, 33 per cent of the adult population had received both doses of coronavirus vaccination, 67 per cent the first dose. In the seven days up to the beginning of the week, 74 people had died, bringing the total of deaths (within 28 days of testing positive for coronavirus) to 127,605. The government kept on encouraging hugging from 17 May.

Abroad

The total in the world recorded to have died with coronavirus reached 3,296,330 by the beginning of the week. The World Health Organisation classified the Indian coronavirus variant B.1.617 as

a 'variant of global concern'. The US Food and Drug Administration authorised the Pfizer vaccine for use in those aged 12 to 15. China said it was setting up a 'line of separation' at the summit of Mount Everest to stop climbers from its side mingling with those from Nepal and spreading Covid.

Hundreds of rockets were fired into Israel from Gaza; Israel hit targets in Gaza. The violence followed police action against Palestinians on the Temple Mount and the attempted eviction of Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Seven children and two adults were killed in a shooting at a school in Kazan in the republic of Tatarstan in Russia. In France, the magazine *Valeurs Actuelles* published a letter it claimed had 130,000 supporters, criticising government concessions to Islamism and saying that 'if a civil war breaks out, the army will maintain order'; a similar letter last month had attracted the signatures of officers in the reserve.

International fears of inflation and interest rate rises sent the FTSE 100 sinking below 7,000 and the US Nasdaq falling by 2 per cent in a day. A cyber-criminal gang called DarkSide made a ransom demand after interfering with the functioning of the Colonial Pipeline, which carried 45 per cent of the American East Coast's supply of oil; the gang said it was apolitical: 'Our goal is to make money.' The ship *Ever Given*, which blocked the Suez Canal in March, still loaded with thousands of containers, continued to be held by Egypt, which sought \$600 million compensation.

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Hands



Face



Space

The new 'new normal'

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FACEBOOK



DIARY

Andrew Sullivan



What would happen to the Republicans after Donald Trump? That has been one of the pundits' favourite themes in the past few months. Maybe the GOP could run against Joe Biden's massive spending and borrowing spurge, some pondered; or go after some low-hanging woke excesses on the left; or exploit the huge influx of illegal immigrants at the southern border that Biden is bringing about so swiftly; or warn of inflation, or the generosity of pandemic relief holding back the recovery; or find some new young faces to appeal to minorities who moved ever so slightly to the right in the last election. And some Republicans have indeed made gestures in that direction.

But gestures are all they have tried, because of one overriding fact. For the Republicans, there is no 'after Trump'. He may have absconded to Mar-a-Lago; he may be banned for a bit longer from Twitter; he may be all but absent from television, but the reality is that in 2021, there is no Republican party to speak of. There is the Trump party. And there are a mere handful of Republicans not completely beholden to him whose careers are over. Even though Trump lost his own re-election, along with the House and, more spectacularly, the Senate, this massive, deranged loser still has absolute command of almost the entire voting bloc on the right. The Republican agenda remains Trump's: keep insisting that the 2020 election was stolen, insist that revenge is necessary and rig the system against the left so that 2020 can never happen again.

Polling shows that a big majority of Republicans still believe the last election was stolen or rigged. And it is impossible to get any Congressional Republican to say publicly that Biden won fairly. In some states, Republican legislatures have passed laws tightening voter access, to suppress Democratic turnout, and changed the way they send electors to the Electoral College.

From now on, a Republican-controlled state legislature can refuse to assent to the popular vote in their state in a presidential election if they believe fraud has taken place, and can ensure the Republican candidate gets the nod instead. Only the courts would then stand in their way. In Arizona, they are having a surreal recount of the 2020 results yet again. They're checking for traces of bamboo in the ballots to prove they came from China.

The 6 January insurrection, designed to prevent the certification of Biden's win, is now described as a harmless stunt by goofy patriots who did nothing wrong. In the words of one prominent conservative, it was 'about the level of a second-tier basketball play-off victory brawl'. In Washington, the only Republican leader who denounced the violence and insisted on the legitimacy of Biden's election is Liz Cheney — and she is now being duly stripped of her authority in the party and replaced by an opportunistic, and much less conservative, Trump toady. It would be lovely to believe that the Trump nightmare is drawing to a close, and the American right could start over. But there is every chance, it seems to me, that the nightmare is merely in abeyance, and could at any point in the next couple of years come roaring right back.

When I think about the issue of wearing face masks in a waning epidemic, my mind drifts to thoughts of condoms. In the last plague I survived, the Aids epidemic, these contraptions became, over time, objects of veneration. They were the gold standard in preventing the lethal virus; they also cut down massively on other sexually transmitted diseases, and if you were a gay man, they were as ubiquitous in the 1990s as masks have been over the past year. They became

symbols of responsibility and virtue. And even after the cocktail of anti-HIV drugs obliterated the virus in the bloodstream, and after all the evidence showed that if you were on the drugs you really couldn't infect anyone, the allure persisted.

Men who rationally followed the science and threw out the rubbers were immediately attacked as reckless. The critics even came up with a term to describe the activity formerly known as sex: 'barebacking'. It conjured up all sorts of unseen images, stigmatising gay sex as a kind of animal instinct, further terrifying and alienating people. The scaremongers after a while went even further: warning of a new and fictional 'super-Aids' that was right around the corner. Tony Fauci was as pro-condom then as he is pro-mask now. And yes, if you kept wearing a condom for sex, you could avoid the clap, just as if you wear a mask all the time now you could probably avoid the flu (and better manage your hay fever). But who wants to live like that?

The psychology of plagues is fascinating. Perhaps one of the weirdest truths is that people get attached to them. The new rituals and practices of safety and virtue become comforting when a crisis abates, you feel adrift in a new normal and want to stay attached to the emergency. Rationality is far less potent than feelings. A return to normal risk, even if it is far lower than before, can seem frightening. Albert Camus noticed this in his great novel *The Plague*; it was true back in 1996, as Aids receded in the West, and it remains as tenaciously correct about human nature in the era of waning Covid. Breathing freely is the new barebacking. We'll get used to it again soon enough.

Andrew Sullivan is a journalist, author and former editor of the New Republic. Last year he launched his *Weekly Dish* newsletter, website and podcast.

Keir Starmer isn't Labour's biggest problem

Keir Starmer has turned a drama into a crisis. The local elections were always going to be difficult for Labour. The government is enjoying the political dividend of the vaccine rollout, and approval for its handling of the Covid crisis is now back to where it was a month into the first national lockdown. Much of the world is still struggling, but Britain has the lowest Covid levels in Europe and Boris Johnson's approval rating is far higher as a result. He triumphed, and Labour struggled. But Starmer made this so much worse by his actions before and after polling day.

The first error was to hold the Hartlepool by-election on the same day as the local elections. Not only did this mean that the previously unknown Tory candidate could associate themselves with the hugely popular Tory mayor of the Tees Valley, who was up for re-election, but also that the Hartlepool result would set the political narrative. Starmer promised to take full responsibility for the election results — then showed how little he meant that by seeking to fire Angela Rayner, the party chair. Word leaked, her allies fought back, and the situation escalated.

In the end it was Starmer's own parliamentary private secretary who resigned — amid accusations that she spread rumours about Rayner's private life. Rayner is now behaving like a member of Theresa May's cabinet, declaring in a BBC interview that 'What I heard on the doorstep is they didn't know what Keir Starmer stood for'.

Just a year after becoming Labour leader, Starmer's approval rating is minus 48 — not quite the level Corbyn sunk to at his nadir, but not that far off. Another poll after the local elections found that his leadership (or lack thereof) was the most commonly cited reason for not voting Labour.

Little wonder then that the vultures are circling. Andy Burnham — one of the few Labour figures to come out of this election with their reputation enhanced — has suddenly begun writing a column for the *Evening Standard*. You don't need to read between the lines to work out why the mayor of Greater Manchester might want a column in a London evening paper that is delivered in bulk to parliament every day.

But the painful truth for Labour is that Starmer's leadership isn't anywhere near the biggest of its problems. The party's fundamental issue is that its old electoral coalition

has fallen apart in recent years. Scotland's 2014 independence referendum saw Labour voters defect to the Scottish National party en masse — and they have never come back. Something similar happened in the 2016 Brexit referendum, when Labour voters in the north-east of England and the Black Country moved to the Tories in the post-Brexit elections. They looked at Labour and saw a party of the metropolitan, cultural left.

Starmer's problem is that the constituent parts of the traditional Labour coalition are moving ever further apart. Many of his metropolitan voters regard Brexit provincially with disdain. If Starmer went all out to try to win back voters in the north-east and the Black Country, he would risk alienating

Labour's main issue is that the parts making up its traditional coalition of support are moving ever further apart

the Labour base in the big cities. In England, Labour leads the Tories in the core cities by a whopping 25 per cent, but it trails the Tories in towns of all sizes, according to the former Labour data analyst Ian Warren.

It is now very hard to see how Labour can win a majority at the next election. Its metropolitan base is too narrow and too concentrated to deliver anything close to 326 seats in the House of Commons.

The situation in Scotland complicates Starmer's position further. One of the biggest challenges for any opposition is getting noticed. The immediate danger for him is that the fight for the Union between Nicola Sturgeon and Boris Johnson will become the dominant political story of the next few years — leaving him as a bit-part player. The medium-term risk for him is that the Scotland situation acts as a brake on any Labour revival in an election campaign. As soon as Labour get to a position where they look



'I draw the line at leading the Labour party.'

like they could deny the Tories a majority, they will start being asked if they would do a deal with a party that wants to break up the United Kingdom. Labour's inability to answer the SNP question in 2015 did it significant damage, and senior Labour figures are worried that Johnson would have no hesitation in going after Labour on this issue come the general election.

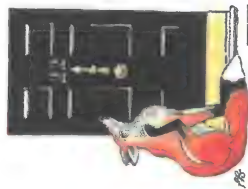
So if Labour is in a mess, are the Tories a shoe-in at the next election? Some excitable Conservatives are talking about another decade in power — which is what they were saying when Theresa May called the 2017 general election. It's amazing how quickly things can shift. As recently as January, polls were showing Labour leads. The jobs have changed politics, but we don't know how long the effects will last. Across the UK, incumbent parties — the Tories in England, Labour in Wales and the SNP in Scotland — benefited from a vaccine bounce and a sense that the crisis is coming to an end. In many ways, it was the Kate Bingham party that triumphed at this election. But when politics becomes about clearing NHS backlogs and stabilising the public finances, rather than immunising people and reopening society, then the situation may feel different.

Normally, a party that has been in power for a decade is vulnerable to the charge that it is time for a change. At the next election, the Tories will be going for a fifth consecutive term in government — something no party has achieved in modern times. But the Tories' ability to reinvent themselves has blunted the potency of this attack. Johnson has distanced himself from austerity, the defining policy of the Cameron government, likening it to drinking one's own urine. Matt Hancock is busy unpicking Andrew Lansley's NHS reforms, and Britain's foreign policy has gone from trying to be China's best friend in the West to trying to midwife a new democratic alliance to contain the country.

We are 101 weeks away from what Tory MPs consider the most likely date of the next election. If denying the Tories a majority is beyond him, the challenge for Starmer is to ensure that Labour avoids the fate of the French Socialists, no longer one of the country's major parties. They have lost the bulk of their parliamentary representation and barely anyone expects them to make the final round in next year's presidential election. At the next election, Labour's survival as a major party will be on the ballot.

THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore



This week, the Church of England issued its document 'Contested Heritage in Cathedrals and Churches'. It is guidance for what those locally running more than 12,000 churches should do about their monuments 'to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation' and address 'the Church's own complicity in structural sin' and 'oppression or marginalisation of people on the basis of their race, gender, religion or sexual orientation'. In church monuments, this usually boils down to whether the person commemorated had links with slavery. Seen from a parish level (where the poor churchwardens, such as my dear wife, will have to do the work), here are some preliminary questions. By whom is the heritage 'contested'? Of those 12,000 churches, how many have previously suffered from protests about monuments? Why does the Church invite contestation if it desires 'peace and reconciliation'? Almost no one who worships in a particular parish wants its church monuments altered. Does Archbishop Welby expect each parochial church council to inspect its monuments to see if they commemorate bad people? Then there is the question of money. Moving, removing or altering a monument is, rightly, a matter of church law, and requires a 'faculty'. The process is slow, involving expert advice, conservation costs (once you take down a historic monument, you cannot just throw it away), building costs and legal costs. These can run into tens of thousands of pounds, way beyond the capacity of almost all churches, especially rural ones. Who will pay? How? Rather than sternly extirpating a few monuments, why doesn't the Church encourage parishes to celebrate most of them? They provide sermons in often beautiful stones.

At national level, there are questions too. Why should Anglican 'structural sin' be confined to issues of race and gender? The biggest specific way in which the Church profited from violence and oppression was through the Reformation. Every church built before that time still bears the scars. Powerful

lords temporal and spiritual grabbed monastic land, buildings and treasures. Archbishops of Canterbury encouraged the persecution and killing of Catholics. Should their monuments come down? I am a Catholic myself, but I have no desire to stir up such a hornet's nest. Yet that is the logic. There is also the law to consider. At present, the Church enjoys 'Ecclesiastical Exemption' from normal heritage planning laws. If the Church plays politics with its own works of art, does it deserve its exemption? The secular state might have to step in to protect the artistic heritage which the Church seeks to efface.

If the bishops must admonish their dwindling congregations, would it not be simpler and cheaper just to revive the service of Communion, which lies little used, in the Book of Common Prayer. ('Cursed is he that removeth his neighbour's landmark' etc.) The service praises the old version of naming and shaming by which 'such persons as stood convicted of notorious sin were put to open penance'. Surely it could be modernised to curse Boris, Brexit, 'Rule, Britannia' and anything else that is on their minds.

If Boris Johnson and Carrie Symonds don't now help me ban lion-hunting trophies, it will be a dereliction of duty, says Lord Ashcroft in a newspaper article this week. It seems an odd way to put it. It is not the duty of the Prime Minister to help Lord Ashcroft, mighty though he may be; and it is the positive duty of Carrie Symonds not to help frame any legislation about anything. The trophy ban, proposed in the Queen's Speech, seems a perfect example of legislation by gesture — in other words, of bad law. If you are allowed to shoot a lion in a foreign country, why should you not be

allowed to import the trophy? Besides, it is arguable that the shooting of big game under law offers a better future for the species than killing by poachers, because it permits economic incentives to preserve them. Certainly, legal game-shooting is likely to be much less cruel, because conducted under enforceable rules, than illicit killing. Lord Ashcroft, possibly rightly, hates 'the captive-bred lion industry', but how does his trophy ban stop it? For some reason I cannot quite define, I feel a positive horror of shooting big cats or elephants, although I enjoy stalking deer. I correspondingly don't want to see stuffed lions on walls. Many people feel the same, but such feelings are personal or aesthetic, and therefore an unsuitable basis for laws. They do not improve the lot of the species.

Four years ago, Jamie Blackett published a fascinating biography of Michael Kidson, an eccentric and much-loved Eton history master, who had been brought up by his grandfather after his parents split up when he was an infant and disappeared. Kidson never forgave his mother, thinking she had deserted him. It was subsequently discovered, however (see Notes, 13 October 2018), that the poor woman had been sent to prison for fraud, probably committed in desperation after she was herself deserted, in order to feed her infant son. Now comes a further twist. Ian Smith, who found out about the mother, has discovered that Kidson too was convicted of a crime. In 1951, aged 22, he pleaded guilty to Ludlow magistrates of using forged School and Higher Certificates (the equivalent of modern GCSE and A-levels) in order to get into Oxford. It emerged in court that, under his grandfather's will, he would come into 'several monies' only if he had attended university. He was conditionally discharged. In his book, Blackett records that Kidson passed the Oxford exam, yet did not go up. Mr Smith's revelation explains why. Somehow or other, however, Kidson got into Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, two years later. I wonder if Caius, or, much later, Eton, winked at all of this. If so, it was mercy well justified.

Highland games

Will Boris Johnson call Nicola Sturgeon's bluff?

FRASER NELSON



During the Scottish leaders' debate, Nicola Sturgeon was asked a rather awkward question: what would she say to voters who want her as First Minister, but who certainly do not want another referendum, especially at such a delicate stage for the country? 'What are they meant to do if they want you, but don't want independence?' she was asked. 'They should vote for me,' she replied, 'safe in the knowledge that getting through this crisis is my priority.'

It's amazing how quickly priorities can change. Sturgeon is already talking as if every Scottish National party vote was a demand for a referendum — and as if Westminster refusing that demand would mean 'standing in direct opposition to the will of the Scottish people'. The SNP was outraged that this week's Queen's Speech, setting out legislation for the next year, did not contain a bill for a second independence referendum. This apparently showed contempt for 'the priorities of the people of Scotland'.

The great Sturgeon bluff has begun — and it's worth examining, because it will overshadow much of British politics for the next few years. The SNP has a story to tell: about an ancient union on the point of collapse, with Scots itching for a referendum and Boris Johnson running scared of their democratic verdict. But in fact the independence movement has seen its momentum slow and its economic case collapse. Sturgeon's battle is now not with Johnson, but with the millions of Scots who do not want independence. But there are few signs of her changing her mind.

As Sturgeon knows, her version of the story is eagerly received in England and globally. 'Independence wins in Scotland,' announced Italy's *La Repubblica* last week. 'The Scottish independence party of Nicola Sturgeon emerged strengthened from the elections,' said *Le Point* (technically true, insofar as the SNP gained one seat). The *New York Times* has been bracing its readers for 'the biggest blow to a British

prime minister since Lord North lost the colonies in America'.

Against such excitement, it seems almost rude to point out that the SNP last week ended up with fewer seats than it did under Alex Salmond in 2011. No party gained or lost more than two seats either way. After spending years saying that Brexit would supercharge the case for independence, Sturgeon has instead seen opinion polls which show support slumping to where it was after the 2014 referendum. Even the arrival of the supposedly hated Johnson in No. 10 does not

*Public opinion in Scotland is nowhere
nearly as overwhelmingly in favour
of independence as it once was.*

seem to have galvanised the SNP vote. 'Iory support held up, even without the formidable Ruth Davidson. The pro-independence bump seen in the autumn has fizzled out.'

So this is her first test: how to present the stagnation in Scottish public opinion as unstoppable momentum towards independence? Verbal tricks are deployed. Under Holyrood's complex electoral system, pro-Union parties won a slender majority of constituency votes but were narrowly outvoted in the regional list. This allows the SNP to talk about the 'majority' who want a referendum — or, more simply, to say that 'Scots' want a referendum. (It's striking how quickly anyone who doesn't want independence has their Scottishness removed.)

Step two is for Sturgeon to create a fuss about the constitution and say what a dem-

ocratic outrage it would be if Westminster were to reject a demand for another referendum. But this case, too, crumbles on further inspection. The Scottish parliament's remit was democratically decided by the 1998 Scotland Act. It has no powers to call for a referendum: if it tried to hold one anyway, the vote would be illegal. Johnson would not have to sue. Any individual Scot could launch a legal appeal to strike down any wildcard referendum. I understand that there is already money in place for a private challenge of this sort.

But all this is based on an even bigger bluff: that the SNP is ready for battle. In truth, public opinion in Scotland is nowhere near the level where nationalists think it would be safe to call another referendum. Last time, when Scots voted 55/45 to remain in the UK, it was said in nationalist circles that another vote would not be held until support for separation hit 60 per cent. It rose to just over 50 per cent in the autumn but has fallen back: the last dozen polls show an average of 44 per cent. (Sturgeon has stopped sharing the results of such polls on Twitter.) Such surveys mock the SNP's claim that Brexit has transformed the appetite for independence.

Even in the last referendum, it was hard to make the economic case for independence. Now Sturgeon does not even try. She admitted during the campaign that she has not updated the economic argument since her 2014 manifesto. But even that blueprint was based on flawed and outdated assumptions: on almost £8 billion revenue from North Sea oil, for example. Or assuming that a breakaway Scotland would be allowed to use sterling as its currency, and that there would be no border friction with England (by far Scotland's biggest economic partner) thanks to Britain's EU membership at the time.

North Sea revenues have since collapsed and Britain has left the European Union. Rejoining is the SNP policy, but this would now mean tearing Scotland out of the cus-

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toms union and single market of the United Kingdom — not to mention borders with England that Brussels would insist upon. Claiming such a border would create jobs (as one SNP candidate did last month) is unlikely to assuage concerns.

If Sturgeon were to fight a referendum campaign, she would not be able to dodge questions like these. She'd have to talk through her plan to dump sterling and adopt an as yet unnamed Scottish currency. A Credit Suisse report has underlined the premium that small countries always pay on their borrowing. How would an independent Scotland raise money to cover its gargantuan deficits when it can no longer draw on the UK's pooled resources? Voters would ask: 'Who will pay my pension? And in what currency will it be paid?'

The SNP has had seven years to think up answers to these questions, but it still has none. It instead talks in abstractions: are we really saying that Scotland is too small or too poor to be independent? Of course not. Independence is perfectly feasible, but at a cost. For example, public spending is £14,830 per head in Scotland, £1,630 higher than the UK average. The tax collected, per

*A bold, positive case for
the Union should be made. It has
never been easier to do so*

head, is £308 lower. No independent country could fill this gap with borrowing. It would mean austerity on a scale never attempted by David Cameron or George Osborne.

You can argue that this would be a price worth paying. But not everyone would agree. A recent poll shows half the younger nationalists would not vote for independence if it would cost them £1,000. At present, it looks like the actual bill would be a lot higher. And this is before you factor in the disruption of a Scottish currency, border controls and the uprooting of economic ties that have existed for centuries.

All such points could be hammered home in a second Project Fear campaign — if it were to come to that. But the Prime Minister has the opportunity to make sure it never does. How can he do this? No. 10 still has not decided on the strategy. He could point-blank refuse to hold a second referendum, but that would play into Sturgeon's narrative of Scotland becoming a captive in a union with (as she puts it) 'no democratic route' to becoming an independent country. By keeping her guessing and saying 'Not yet', he reserves the right to call her bluff later.

Meanwhile a bold, positive case for the Union should be made. It has never been easier to do so. The pandemic has shown the benefits of being a member of the family of the United Kingdom: pooled resources

The White Arch

Two houses up, old Eddie died last week
and a man I've never seen before
is throwing things into the garden
from the back door: a cardboard box, black plastic bags,
a broken kitchen chair.

The garden isn't much, but Eddie had laid a path,
hollowed a goldfish pond, sown
a rockery with alpine flowers,
and, down the garden's end, curved
a white concrete arch

balanced on red brick piles,
a sort of giant cartoon magnet
that only town foxes step through
from the nettle patch that Eddie left
'for luck, for butterflies'.

— William Palmer

away from the rest of the UK is impossible to reconcile with the many social attitudes studies showing that, if anything, the two countries are converging. There's more difference of opinion between the south-east and south-west of England than between Scotland and England.

This makes Sturgeon's achievement all the more remarkable: in defiance of the economic and political trends she has conjured up an image of a Scotland all geared up to a future outside of the UK. This is why she is one of the most formidable politicians not just in Britain but in Europe — and the truth is she's up against Tories who zone out and lose interest. It takes time and effort to understand Holyrood and the politics of nationalism. No. 10 does not even have a strategy. It could well be that the greatest threat to the Union is not Scottish agitation but English indifference.

The story of British unity and shared achievement has never been properly told — but the government has in No. 10, a word-smith who might fancy himself as Sturgeon's match in this regard. If he were to lose to her in a second referendum, he'd have to resign and his premiership would end in failure: no one doubts that. The question, fundamentally, is whether he cares about saving the Union as much as she cares about ending it. The way to stop a referendum is to take a lesson from the SNP, and to fight.

allowed a £407 billion response, with a generous furlough scheme. An independent Scotland would no more have been able to afford this than it would have been able to bail out RBS after the last crash. Scots are now more likely to be vaccinated than people of any country in Europe — thanks to Kate Bingham and the UK vaccines taskforce. When trouble strikes, there's power in a union.

Sturgeon will keep trying to pick fights on issues that suit her: about flags flown over buildings, about the legality of referendums etc. The smart response from No. 10 would be to avoid rising to this bait and for the UK Prime Minister to act as a UK Prime Minister — focusing on Scotland's (many) problems while the SNP focus on the constitution. He could visit more frequently and do more to help — especially in areas where the devolved government has failed.

Drugs deaths are perhaps the most egregious example, with Scotland harder hit than anywhere else in Europe. The sheer level of addiction ought to qualify as a national emergency, yet it is treated with near inattention by too many in Holyrood. There is no law saying that Westminster cannot help Scotland: indeed, post-Brexit powers of state aid make it easier for the UK government to do more in places like Glasgow, which has some of the worst deprivation in the developed world.

The idea of Scotland drifting inexorably

Extreme measures

Britain must investigate its Islamist 'dawa' networks

AYAAN HIRSI ALI

A few months ago, William Shawcross was asked by the government to lead an independent review into its anti-terrorism strategy. Prevent, and to 'consider the UK's strategy for protecting people vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism'. Ever since his appointment was announced, Shawcross has been attacked by an array of activists who want to minimise any scrutiny of Islamist organisations. The campaign against him has been vicious but it has also been deeply instructive.

The opposition has been so intense that it has led some to believe that the UK Muslim 'community' is outraged by the independent review. There is a significant difference, however, between Muslims and Islamists. Shawcross is an exceptionally talented man whom I know well. His career of service is a distinguished one. For six years he ran the Charity Commission with strength and skill. He has been a member of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' Informal Advisory Group, among many other roles, all while being a prolific and renowned author. He has a reputation for fairness and fearlessness; he is an excellent choice.

But if I could give him one piece of advice, it would be this. The scope of his review should be expanded to look at the individual networks of Islamist groups which are technically separate but in practice hunt as a pack. Their approach forms the basis of what is known in Islamic culture as 'dawa'. The campaign against Shawcross is in fact a good illustration of the Islamist dawa programme, which is why it badly needs his scrutiny. To solve any problem, you must first recognise it. Nearly 16 years after the 7/7 attacks in London, it is striking how many policymakers struggle to see the true face — and nature — of the jihadi menace.

Formally, dawa refers to a 'call' to Islam. But in reality, Islamist groups use a wide range of mechanisms to advance their goal of imposing Islamic law (shariah) on society. In western countries, dawa aims both to instil extremist views among existing Muslims and, to a lesser extent, to convert non-Muslims to a fierce version of political Islam. Shariah law is hostile to women's rights (legally and in the family sphere), religious

minorities, religious tolerance, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of conscience, social pluralism — in short, all the values Karl Popper described as being the foundation of the 'open society'. Although Islamists use proselytising in their dawa programme, it extends well beyond that, to a process of personal indoctrination and total social and institutional transformation.

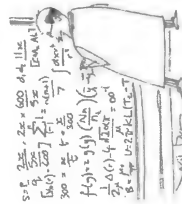
Some adherents to dawa reject democracy, while others see it as a useful mechanism, provided either Islamists win (as they did after the Arab spring in Egypt) or that electoral options are restricted to Islamist choices determined well in advance (as in Iran). Other Islamists who pursue dawa are

(Muslims, informants and Muslims) are viewed by Islamists as a problem that must be dealt with

politically 'quietist', focused on Islamising all of society and its institutions before tackling the political domain. Pluralistic, reformist Muslims (to say nothing of ex-Muslims) are viewed by Islamists as a problem that must be dealt with.

A number of Islamist groups countenance violence as a tactic. But whether or not violence is used, the endpoint favoured by Islamists is at odds with British society and its governing institutions. If Boris Johnson's government avoids tackling the ideological infrastructure of Islamism, the UK will be forced not only to deal with spasmodic eruptions of violence, but with a fracturing of society.

If Shawcross fully investigates the challenge of Islamism as part of his review, he



'And that's how you save the Labour party!'

will be in good company. A number of European governments have introduced new ways to monitor and counter Islamist activities in order to reverse 'separatism' and the creation of 'parallel societies'. In July last year, for example, Austria announced the creation of an Observatory for Political Islam in order to tackle Islamism within its borders. In France, in the wake of the murder of French teacher Samuel Paty, President Emmanuel Macron made waves with his initiatives to counter Islamist separatism — and to build up mainstream Islam.

If Britain is to do the same, it needs to look at its own homegrown dawa networks. Groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood should be investigated, but so should Jama'at-e-Islami, Hizb ul-Tahrir and similar organisations. Some are registered as 'charities', though the destination of some funds is questionable. Shawcross has experience of dealing with these groups, having looked into many of them while running the Charity Commission. This may explain some of the ire of his critics.

Other dawa groups are registered as mosques and Islamic centres, but if these are Islamist in orientation they should be investigated too. Then there are the schools that impart an Islamist ideology as well as the informal groups that gather online and in person.

Some dawa programmes have benign elements that qualify as 'religious teachings', including harmless exhortations to pray, fast during the month of Ramadan or give to those less fortunate. But others preach that almost all modern-day activities are haram, or prohibited. Men and women mingling together socially is considered taboo, and genders must be segregated. Some organisations offer services related to shariah family law. Many of these archaic rules compromise the rights of women: divorce, inheritance, and child custody rules all favour men in ways incompatible with modern equality.

The people targeted by dawa programmes tend to be young, impressionable Muslim men and women. They are often from immigrant communities, including those with low incomes and little education. Prisoners, as well as young children and teenagers, are also targeted. By far the largest category of people approached are those born into Islam, but non-Muslims are also targeted.

France failed to tackle the structural challenge of Islamism in a timely manner — with calamitous results. Britain ought to waste no time in investigating the infrastructure of dawa as it exists in the UK. To miss the chance for such an assessment now will come back to haunt the UK in years to come.

Join Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Douglas Murray on Tuesday 1 June for an online discussion on navigating the culture wars. To book, go to spectator.co.uk/culturewars

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Why I spoilt my ballot paper



The headline 'Government to allow people to hug' one might have expected to hear on early evening news bulletins in January 1661, shortly after Oliver Cromwell was posthumously executed and puritanism began its slow and welcome withdrawal from England. It sounds a little odd in 2021. Below the headline came the inevitable caveats from the medical clergy. While hugging you should turn your face aside so as to minimise the risk of infecting the person you are embracing. I think people are also enjoined to keep their hands well above the waist — during amorous encounters with people in your 'bubble' you are allowed only to 'get your tops', as we schoolboys used to put it. No kissing, and certainly not with tongues. I assume the popular gay practice of 'front-bling', the details of which I cannot go into here, is still completely banned and we will need another announcement from Professor Whittle on this activity in the months ahead. Somewhere on the bloody roadmap there will be a possible date for the resumption of such stuff.

The headline about hugging prompted everyone asked about it on our airwaves to lie through their teeth. They could not wait to start hugging people again, they all said. Really? How needy and cloying have we all become? I simply don't believe this. Nor do I believe that they have refrained from hugging anyone for the best part of a year, as they all dutifully insisted they had. I've been in the north-east for the past month or so and it already had a very post-Covid feel to it, very different from London. There was plenty of hugging going on and, shops excepted, a general lack of concern about social distancing. I have the suspicion that the 'Yes, you can now hug — All your boots' announcement was something of a fait accompli. Me — I don't wish to hug anyone and felt wholly comfortable with the ban. Perhaps I should have lived at a time when Cromwell was in his pomp.

One of my duties while in the north-east was to vote — for the mayor of the Tees Valley and also our local police and crime commissioner. I have a problem on the latter issue as I think it is an expensive and damaging waste of time and money. I would like

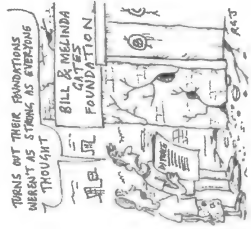
to see our police depoliticised, not beholden to the reflexive jiggery-wokery of failed politicians and their deranged obsessions. The fact that the police today seem to spend 90 per cent of their time investigating imaginary hate crimes is surely the consequence of them being instructed to do so by Labour and liberal politicians who believe that these largely chimeric instances are more important than property theft or stabbing or drug-dealing.

I have a personal gripe with these commissioners, too. A few years back a Welsh politician suggested that I should be investigated for hate crimes because I joked that the Welsh language seemed somewhat

I would like to see our police depoliticised, not beholden to the jiggery-wokery of failed politicians

short of vowels, and he referred the matter to his local police force. I contacted the Welsh fuzz to suggest that the politician be prosecuted for wasting police time, only to be told that the imbecilic Noggin the Nog in question was actually the local police and crime commissioner. Get rid of them all, now (the only major party which proposes such a thing is the Social Democratic party, incidentally).

The correct response then was to spoil my ballot paper — which, in the end, I did. But first I checked through the policy statements from the four candidates. Most were concerned with reforming the force — Cleveland has the worst police force in the country, officially. They also talked



about antisocial behaviour, drugs, safety on the streets and so on — all big concerns up here. Except for the Labour guy. Except for him. What was one of the booted, jowly idiot's priorities? To create a BAME advisory panel on cohesion. They cannot help themselves, can they? We have very few BAMEs up here. Around about 3 per cent of the Cleveland population. We are almost BAMEless. Anyway, the Conservative candidate won by a landslide while the Labour bloke was down on one knee, looking the other way.

The interesting question for Labour is not whether it can win back the so-called 'red wall' seats — it can't, ever, because in order to do so it would have to adopt policies which would estrange it from the areas where it can do well: affluent university cities such as Oxford and Cambridge, affluent pretend-countryside places, such as Chipping Norton, and various noisome nests of weirdos and perverts, such as Brighton. The question is can it corral enough votes from the young, the glibble, the deluded, the earnestly obsessive and the merely affluent to provide a challenge to the Tories? More to the point, can it convince a sufficient number of liberal Tories that the Labour party is a more natural habitat within which to express their civilised and stupid views?

This will be a long process, but it is already happening. It is not too difficult to envisage Justine Greening and Amber Rudd, for example, as Labour MPs. There are plenty of liberal Tories, largely but not exclusively in the south-east, who buy into pretty much all of the irrational woke rubbish which is espoused by the Labour party, the Greens and the Lib Dems. They do so, I suppose, because it makes them feel better about themselves.

The next question, then, is to what extent does Boris Johnson's Conservative party attempt to shore up its own historic support-base among the well-off — under threat from the left for the best part of a decade now? Or does it continue 'levelling up' while waving the flag and espousing 'traditional' values? Sooner or later, something has to give. It is a fascinating time to be observing politics, and all the more enjoyable now that we can hug one another again.

'A worse pandemic will be next'

Michael Lewis on the scientists who saw Covid coming – and were ignored

MARY WAKEFIELD



Michael Lewis's new book, *The Premonition*, is a superhero story – though one in which the superheroes don't, in the end, win. It's the true story of a group of far-sighted, tough-minded scientists who, in January last year, saw the coronavirus pandemic coming in the USA, and the politicians who wouldn't listen to them.

And at the heart of the book is the terrible discovery, as true here as it is in the States: we imagine that, come disaster, the people we elect will look after us. We're told they're well prepared. But when it comes down to it, they protect not us but themselves.

The villain of Lewis's book is the United States Centers for Disease Control, which equivocated until it was far too late and ignored the pandemic plan it had. Here in the UK, Public Health England simply didn't have a plan. My husband, who was working for Boris Johnson at the time, came home incredulous one day in late February 2020: 'I've seen the plan, and I'm afraid it's not a plan at all. It's just a plan to have a plan at some stage.'

The Premonition is a book about mass death and institutional cowardice and its heroes end up sidelined. So one of the strangest things about it is that it's a blast to read. It's exhorting but it's also joyful – and it wasn't until I was face to face with Michael Lewis that I understood why.

'I hate to say it but I had the most fun pandemic,' Lewis grins. He's 60 but boyish, in the best sense of the word. It's hard to have a satisfactory peer about when you're speaking to someone on Zoom, but on the screen Lewis looks happy and his hair bounces excitedly as he talks. 'I had so much fun writing this book. I don't say this every time but it was so character-driven and so story-driven that basically I locked myself in a condo without any kids, without my wife, for stretches of two or three weeks at a time and it came out of me so fast.'

Faster than *The Big Short* or *Flash Boys*? Faster than *Liar's Poker*? Lewis's first proper job was for the investment bank Salo-

Back in the George W. Bush era, Carter wrote America's official pandemic plan (not that anyone followed it in 2020).

Also in Lewis's cast of characters is Joe DeRisi, inventor of Virochip, which contains DNA from every virus ever discovered and can scan for evidence of infection. And best of all, there's Charity Dean, the plain-speaking former second-in-command of California's Department of Public Health. Dr Dean is a bit like Reese Witherspoon with the relentless drive of *Terminator 2*. Through the start of 2020 she continuously sounded the alarm from inside government, but was sidelined as a result. Now, pleasingly, she's all over TV in America, sticking it to the people who wouldn't listen.

'All the characters are very brave,' says Lewis. 'But I give Charity the most credit because she has so many reasons to be afraid. The others are kind of alpha males. There's nothing for them to fear really. Charity, everywhere she turns, she's like the bunny in the jungle waiting for the predator to come get her -- but then the predator finds out she's the dragon!' Lewis laughs.

If *The Premonition* is a cheery book, despite the death, it's because these brave, data-driven types are out there -- weirdos and misfits, you might call them. And it's also because they don't run from problems like politicians do: they actively seek them out so as to fix them.

In January last year the CDC and the WHO adopted a sort of fraudulent bedside manner: 'Don't fret about Covid, there's no evidence of human-to-human transmission.' Remember that? At the time, Dr Dean wasn't so sure. She watched the YouTube videos of Chinese authorities welding apartment doors shut to keep residents indoors, and thought: 'This is real.'

Dr Dean and the Wolverines are experts in what Lewis calls 'red-neck epidemiology', using the scrappy bits of data available to plot the likely course of the virus. They were among the first to sketch out that awful, now familiar exponential curve. But why did they, in particular, see Covid com-

mon Brothers, and it inspired *Liar's Poker*, his era-defining 1989 book about the greed and corruption of Wall Street. Since then he's written a whole slew of bestsellers and is often described as the best financial journalist alive, so it's quite something that he's most excited by *The Premonition*.

'I'm only as good as the material I'm given, I can't make it up, but this material is so good that... well, it's like dancing with someone who's a great dancer, they make you a better dancer,' he says. 'It was abso-

'I hate to say it but I had the most fun pandemic'

lutely exhilarating. Meanwhile, 600,000 Americans are dying and I'm having the time of my life!

Is that obnoxious? I think it's refreshing. It's exactly this lack of self-serving gravitas that makes the book so good. *The Premonition* isn't ponderous, because Lewis isn't. It's not grim, because he's so completely lit up with excitement about his characters.

Who was it that Lewis was dancing with in his condo? First up is a group of doctors nicknamed the Wolverines, who for the past 20 years have made it their business to understand viral pandemics. A guerrilla disease-fighting operation, Lewis calls them. The Wolverines are led by Carter Mecher, an intensive-care doctor with a strange gift for predicting and mapping viral outbreaks.

ing, I ask Lewis — what traits, apart from being bullish, do these characters share? 'They aren't just professionals, they're obsessives,' says Lewis. 'And they're obsessed with the problem they're dealing with because they care. They don't think 600,000 dead people, they think 600,000 individuals who have people who love them, who are experiencing catastrophic grief. When you're looking at it that way you build tools that you might not if you were just doing a job. You develop intuition.'

Carter Mecher likes to compare a viral pandemic to a brush fire. 'You cannot wait for the smoke to clear,' he says, because 'once you can see things clearly it's already too late.' You have to act before the fire is raging, and you have to be prepared to be wrong. This, according to *The Premontion*, was the CDC's great failing: it wasn't prepared to try for containment, and actively waited until it was too late rather than risk being wrong. Lewis says: 'Cambodia contained [Covid-19]. Rwanda contained it... Australia, and you're kind of like, how come they could do it and we couldn't?'

His book contains a telling story: on 29 January 2020, the US government repatriated

'The quality of our citizen is in decline. Quorum don't understand that someone is doing this hard job'

ed 57 Americans from Wuhan and put them into quarantine for 14 days. One of the Wolverines, James Lawler, head of the Global Centre for Health Security, suggested they be tested before being released because it had much longer incubation periods. Lawler offered to do the testing himself, but the CDC actually forbade it.

At the same sort of time, Charly Dean was acting on her intuition and wrote a battle plan for California that included measures such as social distancing. But her boss, former CDC employee Sonia Angell, responded by simply excluding her from meetings. She told Dr Dean not to use the word 'pandemic': 'You're scaring people.'

'Shit, they should be scared,' said Dr Dean. She noticed, says Lewis, when the CDC made a curious pivot, from downplaying the virus to behaving as if it could never have been contained. Later, Dr Dean told Lewis: 'The greatest trick the CDC ever pulled was convincing the world containment wasn't possible.'

The Premontion is a celebration of Dr Dean and the Wolverines, but it's also a warning: employ the right people for the right reasons or suffer the consequences. In California, Sonia Angell knew diddle squat about communicable disease — her expertise was in heart disease. Governor Gavin Newsom knew that, but he wanted

a person of colour in the top job. 'It was an optics problem,' a senior official in the health department told Lewis. 'Charity was too young, too blonde, too Barbie.'

Lewis says: 'Newsom had gotten himself in this mess where his administration said let's decorate the cabinet, let's make sure we hire a minority for the head of the health department, without asking "Is the minority qualified?" and when you had Charity Dean there. That was a catastrophic error.'

But why didn't that change when Covid came along? Why didn't Dr Angell stand down, or defer to Dr Dean, a trained epidemiologist? 'I don't know!' Lewis says, and laughs. 'I am always surprised by people who take jobs they're not qualified for. Why did Rick Perry agree to be secretary of energy [under Trump]? He didn't even know what the department did and he made an ass of himself showing everybody that.'

The Premontion tells a familiar tale: politicians are motivated by the wrong things in America, just as much as they are over here. Instead of pursuing the truth, they pursue approving headlines. But at this point in our chat, just when I'm looking forward to Lewis unleashing a little vitriol on the political class, he changes tack.

'Politicians are kind of incentivised to be right,' he says. 'I mean, it's easy for you and me to say: who cares if I'm going to be called an ass on the front page of the newspaper tomorrow? But I think when you're in it and you are constantly responding to the way people are responding to you, it becomes this churn of short-term incentives and... I'm kind of sympathetic! I think if I was in that, I would have a hard time ignoring Twitter and television and all of it.'

And in the end, to my surprise, he points the finger of blame back towards us — towards the public. 'The quality of our citizen is in decline,' he says. 'Citizens don't understand that someone is doing this hard job and sometimes they are going to be wrong and if they're wrong, it's not because they're idiots or malicious or corrupt; it's that the job is making decisions in conditions of uncertainty. I think there's an attitude that we have towards the leaders that's an indulgence. We're allowed to have it because we haven't really experienced real terror, existential terror like you did in, say, the second world war.'

So coronavirus isn't frightening enough? We need to be more afraid, so as to behave better and more rationally? 'Maybe if you just ratchet up the lethality a bit and you actually expose the whole population, then you might get a different response,' he says.

'This has been a horrible pandemic, but it is not, in the view of my characters, the big one,' Lewis adds. 'They all feel sure a worse one is coming.' That, I guess, is their next premonition — and the best hope, I suppose, is that by then Dr Charity Dean and the Wolverines are actually in charge.

ANCIENT AND MODERN Nature calls



'Georgics' are an ancient form of poetry about agriculture and the land. The term derives from Greek *gē* 'land' + *ergon* 'work' (of farmer George) and emphasises the necessity of working hard to counteract deprivation, build a nation and forge a civilised world. Virgil's *Georgics* (29 ac) in four books are a supreme example of the genre and not without relevance to the modern 'green' agenda.

Its opening outlines the subject matter: field crops and tilling the soil, viticulture, and the care and skill required to tend cows, sheep and bees. Virgil then calls on the gods to aid his task, and finally asks the young Octavian (soon to become Augustus, the first Roman emperor) to smile on his poem in a world so recently torn by strife and civil war (Caesar against Pompey, 49 ac).

It rapidly becomes clear that farming is no joyride and the wise farmer must be guided by Nature's signs. But Nature's recent signs — volcanoes, earthquakes, comets — turn out to be its own response to that bloody war and a world out of control, 'where right and wrong change places', a world swept along like a chariot by the races tugging hopelessly at the reins of a 'headless chariot'. The social and political are also in play here. Nature warns: will man listen?

If he does, Virgil insists, the man who understands Nature will understand man. The natural world reflects human feelings: rivers feel the weight of boats; unfruitful trees can be taught, and will gladly learn, to mend their ways; ails scavenge in fear of a lean old age; the ox that drops dead at the plough (unyoked from its grieving mate) will no longer enjoy the clear streams, luscious meadows and shade of lofty trees that brought him such comfort. Bees exemplify a society working selflessly for each other in the communal interest, a model on which civilised human life can flourish.

One must read the poem to catch the raw, emotional power of Virgil's glorious, kaleidoscopic vision of Nature's interaction with man. Anthropomorphic tosh? Maybe. But given the interdependence between the two, the warning is as you sow, so shall you reap.

— Peter Jones

There's nothing unjust about selling the family house to pay for care

LEO MCKINSTRY

The sound of the well-off grumbling about their finances is always an unattractive one. But there is one gripe that has become particularly powerful, filling the airwaves and shaping public policy. This is the persistent, ever louder complaint from many households that they are required to sell the family home to pay the costs of care for a close relative. It is a practice widely seen as 'a scandal', where the state seizes private property because of its own failure to create a properly funded care system that meets the needs of the elderly.

The flames of grievance are stoked by the press, pressure groups and politicians, who promote the belief that all social care should be free, or at least massively subsidised. The campaign body Age UK moans that '167,000 older people now have to fund their own care because they do not meet the brutal means test'. One newspaper recently screeched about 'the betrayal of the middle class'. Sensing the mood, Boris Johnson declared when he became Prime Minister in July 2019 that 'my job is to protect you and your parents and grandparents from having to sell your home to pay for the costs of care'.

High Covid death rates in care homes highlighted the need for comprehensive reform in this sector. For campaigners, such change should mean a vast new injection of cash that will end 'the injustice' of the expropriation of assets by the government. In March, Johnson pledged a ten-year plan for social care, while last month Matt Hancock confirmed that social care reforms would be implemented before the end of this year, though there was only a brief, vague mention of the government's plan in the Queen's Speech this week. The indignation is driven by the requirement that any residents with savings or assets of less than £14,250 are entitled to free care, whereas those marginally above this threshold have to pay a share of the costs, while those with capital of more than £23,250 have to meet their bills in full. Under this rule, it is estimated that 17,000 older people have had to sell their homes in the past year, up 45 per cent since 2000.

This might be an emotional wrench for families, but it cannot really be described as a 'scandal'. Indeed, the cry of free care for all involves a far greater unfairness, since such a measure could only be paid for by a huge

rise in taxation. In practice, hard-pressed wage earners would have to fork out more to enable richer households to keep their wealth intact. Behind the rhetoric about inequality lies the determination of many of the affluent to protect their inheritances.

Why should other taxpayers be hampered to uphold these private ambitions? In a society where average full-time weekly pay is just £586, the equivalent of £30,472 a year, many of those targeted for additional bills will not even own their own homes, nor enjoy anything like the affluence of the inheritors. It is a twisted kind of entitlement to believe that the government has a duty to provide free care so that the better-off can safeguard their legacies.

There is vast private wealth in this country, partly due to the explosion in the value

Behind the rhetoric about inequality lies the determination of many of the affluent to protect their inheritances

of property, with the over-65s accounting for almost half of the money in housing. According to one estimate, total household net wealth was £14.6 trillion in December 2019. The pandemic has only accelerated the trend, with house prices rising by no less than 8.6 per cent over the 12 months to February.

Inheritances are part of this pattern. A study last year by the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that, as property values surge, the median inheritance for those born in the 1980s has risen to £136,000, more than double the £66,000 for those born in the 1960s. Many receive far more; the IFS analysis revealed one quarter of people born in the 1980s have parents with an estate 'per heir' (that is after dividing it between their children) of £300,000 or more. It is only right some of this wealth should be tapped to pay for social care.

Such an argument is an affront to the inheritance protection brigade. They want none of the financial responsibilities for care and all the advantages of a free system. The most blinkered wait that their parents 'worked hard' to pass something on, but soaring property prices provide a classic example of unearned wealth. They gripe about the state's generosity to those without

any assets, but want the wealthy to become the biggest welfare claimants of all.

There is undoubtedly a care crisis in Britain, but the political focus on protecting property has thwarted attempts at sustainable reform. In a sense it is the middle class who have betrayed the system with their narrow self-interest. When in 2010 Labour came up with a perfectly sensible proposal for an inheritance surcharge to pay for long-term care, it was immediately denounced by their opponents as a 'death tax'. The party went down to a heavy defeat. In 2017, Theresa May set out a plan by which people needing social care would have to pay for it until the value of their assets, including their home, reached a floor of £100,000. Nicknamed the 'dementia tax' the idea prompted such a furious reaction that it almost ushered Jeremy Corbyn into power. Since then, ministers have been too paralysed to act.

But a free care system is not the answer. There is no cost-free panacea, as is demonstrated by how other countries have grappled with the problem. Japan's system, to which everyone over 40 has to contribute, is funded by a mix of taxation, age-based premiums and user co-payments. In Germany everyone has to contribute to their future costs from the moment they start working, either to the government's own programme or to private health insurance.

In the UK, some argue that private insurance could be the way to spread the cost and avoid enforced home sales. But that is not practical, because private insurers refuse to provide suitable products. A more realistic suggestion was put forward in March by Lord Lilley, the former social security secretary. In a paper for the thinktank Civitas, he urged the creation of a not-for-profit company, owned and guaranteed by the state, which would 'offer everyone approaching state-pension age the opportunity to take out insurance against the need to finance, from their home or other assets, the cost of social care'.

The charge — which would be a small fraction of the property's value, perhaps as low as £16,000 — would only be realised when the owner dies or the home is sold. That offers a workable, affordable way out of the current mess — if only some of the middle class would drop their obsession with maximising their inheritances.

Thinking about the planet? That's smart

Smart meters are helping us do our bit for the environment. In fact, if we all got one, the CO₂* savings Britain could make would be equivalent to the savings made by roughly 70 million trees.

Ask your energy supplier for a smart meter.



*Total CO₂ savings between 2013-2034 based on official Gov. forecast for smart meter rollout. 2019. Eligibility may vary. Consumer action required. ALBERT EINSTEIN rights licensed by The H.U.J./Greenlight.

Open arms

It's the hugs vs the hug-nots

EMILY HILL

On Monday, the Prime Minister says, we can hug again. Personally, I never stopped, but then I've been corrupted by southerners, foreigners, posh boys and gorgeous homosexuals. In luvvic land (aka London and Twitter), there's this perception that everyone is desperate to rush into one another's arms because they've desired for so long. In many places outside the M25, that idea is so nuts it's comical. In Norfolk, where I was raised, most people meet with a nod and a grunt, and it is the height of good manners not to 'look at anyone funny' (in other words, we don't make eye contact with strangers). If any outsider tries to offer a hug next week, they'll likely get clobbered.

For those of us who like hugging, Monday's easing of restrictions will be embraced with delight. But there's no convincing those who don't like it, and if you're from the shires you're sure to have relatives who despise it. 'My great-aunt Mavis gave about as many hugs as the Queen,' says my friend Anna, estimating the number of hugs the Queen gives at zero. 'Dead reliable, rescued my mother as a teenager, but no tactility — if she was feeling affectionate, the furthest she'd go was calling her "Duckie".'

'Hugging is the worst and I hate people who hug,' a former colleague confesses. 'Now it's going to be grim because even the people who don't normally hug you will feel they have to do so. It makes me want to go back in my cave so I don't have to face it.'

In 2016, there was even a concerted campaign by some remainers to go around hugging anyone who wanted to leave the EU — and we all know how that turned out. Hugging has been forcibly repelled, even at the ballot box.

As a child I can't remember getting any hugs from my father except once, when he handed me a rape alarm on the day he shoed me off to university. Never, in all my years, did I see him hug my mother, and for this reason, biblical accounts of conception had previously made perfect sense. Live and let live — repression is OK.

In my home village of Blakeney (population: 801), interlopers make fools of themselves with their airy-fairy affections cast about willy-nilly where they're not wanted. One man — shortly before becoming my

uncle — went so far as to kiss my mother on the cheek upon meeting her. He was lucky my father didn't make my mother carry a rape alarm because she'd have set it off.

My aunt didn't like kissing or hugging any better than my mother did. Years later, when she was in the late stages of pregnancy and my uncle clearly felt her defences had been weakened, he had the temerity to hug her in front of me. Her response was to whip up a wet tea towel and hit him with it.

My handsomest man friend has a dad who loathes hugging too. 'We know a Turkish guy who gives him hugs. He is livid afterwards,' says my friend. 'But the Turkish guy doesn't realise — because he's British.'

The pandemic has in some ways been convenient for anti-huggers, who can blame

The pandemic has been convenient for anti-huggers, who can blame their opposition to it on a dread of infection

their opposition to it on dread of infection. 'For years I've been recoiling from people's embraces,' the writer Martha Frankel admitted in the *Guardian*. 'In 2008 I got the flu — and bad. What I experienced during those three weeks absolutely terrified me. I feared I would die... That next winter I noticed how people would cough into their hands and still try to shake mine. Or they would rub their noses and then lean in for a kiss. Don't even get me started on little children, those snoot machines.'

But for most people, I suspect not wanting to hug anyone has pretty much nothing to do with germophobia or a bathing of kids.

Hugging is a word that may have entered our language in the 16th century, but prior to Princess Diana's era, it just wasn't a public spectacle. Like public crying, it was generally seen as vulgar, perhaps American, and it only really became a thing forcibly imposed on us by New Labour after Diana's death.

Anyone who has retained a stiff upper lip should beware, come Monday. There will be compulsive huggers about looking to share the joy. Those on the other side should make sure they stay rigid as an ironing board even in the midst of a bear hug, for fear of encouraging more.

BAROMETER

At Redwall Abbey

Does fiction provide any guide as to the ultimate fate of Labour's Red Wall? — Redwall Abbey was the setting for a series of children's novels written by Brian Jacques between 1986 and his death in 2011. It revolved around the peace-loving creatures of Mossflower Wood who were forced to fight invading vermin. The first of the novels, called *Redwall*, featured an orphaned mouse who had become a voice monk and was forced to fight off an evil, one-eyed rat. At the end of the final novel, published posthumously, an otter and hedgehog emerged triumphant over the 'vermin' — a loose band of creatures which included rats, foxes, wildcats, magpies, rooks and crows. Critics complained that the plots were somewhat repetitive.

The biggest killers

So far, 3.2 million deaths have been attributed to Covid-19, over 16 months. Meanwhile, how many people are dying of other infectious diseases, globally?

Sepsis	11 million (estimate from 2017)
Tuberculosis	1.4 million (2019)
Pneumonia	808,000 (just children, 2019)
HIV/Aids	690,000 (2019)
Flu	290,000-650,000 (annual estimate, not for any particular year)
Malaria	409,000 (2019)
Cholera	143,000 (annual estimate, not for any particular year)
Measles	140,000 (2018; most measles deaths are children under five years old)
Typhoid	128,000-161,000 (estimate not attached to any particular year)
Yellow fever	29,000-60,000
Tetanus	34,000

Source: WHO

Near and far

Hugging will be allowed again but social distancing will remain. In which countries, pre-pandemic, did people like to stand closest to strangers while engaging in conversation, and in which countries did they prefer to be further away?

CLOSIEST

Argentina.....**0.76 metres**
Other countries where people stand at less than **0.9 metres** distance are Peru, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Austria, Slovakia.

FURTHEST AWAY

Romania.....**1.4 metres**
Other countries where people stand more than **1.2 metres** apart are Hungary, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Uganda, Pakistan. England came midway down the table of 42 countries, with a distance of **1 metre**.

Source: University of Wrocław study published in Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 2017

The wrath of Nicola Sturgeon



I can't seem to find the Oracle of Delphi's complete works. The libraries remain shut and when I go to Google I find the search engine inadequate in the matter of the 'Complete Pythia'. So I throw the following story out there unsourced in the sure and certain knowledge that next week's letters page looks set to be a bloodbath for me. *Spectator* readers are among the most learned readers around, and I know my fate if I relay any of this inaccurately. Nevertheless here we go.

Several years ago an utterance I'm pretty sure came from the Delphic Oracle lodged in my head. A foreign king (I hear you tapping 'Dear Sir' as I type) wanted to know whether he should go across the river and invade a neighbouring kingdom. The Oracle, whose utterances were famously ambiguous — not to say Delphic — proclaimed: 'If the king crosses the river, a mighty realm will be destroyed.' The King took this to mean that he would have a great victory. He gathered the army, crossed the water and lost his own kingdom back home. We might pause here for a moment to note that the Oracle of Delphi could be a right bastard.

Anyhow, this stuck in my mind because of the history of our own country during recent years. There were moments in the Theresa May years in particular when the Delphic story seemed especially pertinent. The British public had made this great statement of intent. The path seemed clear. Then the politicians engaged in a spot of their own bloodletting. We ended up with a minority government. You know the rest. The point is that we had tried to make our great leap and instead looked set to lose everything. We voted to be an independent nation and lost our own kingdom. Happily the fear receded. But now, thanks to Nicola Sturgeon, it is reignited. For those still embittered by the electorate's 2016 decision it is — you must grant — a stunning way to punish us. 'Oh you thought you were so clever, wanting to be an "independent country". Well how do you like this?' are roughly the words spoken by the figure of death, or Lord Mandelson. It is a threat from the same school as that which gleefully mooted the possibility of a return to the Troubles or Irish unifica-

tion. You silly Brits voted Brexit and then lost your own kingdom. That'll teach you.

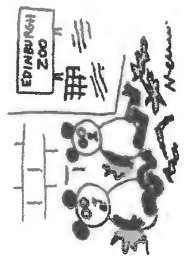
Yet nowhere could this vengeful wish be more deeply satisfied than if Nicola Sturgeon got her way. As a British unionist I loathe Sturgeon and remain confounded by the fact that all forms of nationalism are viewed as abhorrent in this culture unless they come wrapped in tartan. Sturgeon's politics are of the most noxious kind: calculatedly divisive, fantastical, entirely reliant on stirring up hatred. Look at the first adverts for Alex Salmond's new Alba party and you'll see that the most rank ethnonationalism sits not far behind its pretended progressive exterior.

And now Sturgeon has decided to kick off again. Having run a campaign for the recent

All forms of nationalism are viewed as abhorrent in this culture unless they come wrapped in tartan

elections in which she insisted that another independence referendum (IndyRef2) was not the issue, she got her narrow victory and promptly announced that it made the logic for IndyRef2 irrefutable. Of course the logic of another referendum will always be irrefutable for the Nats. It is the great advantage that monomaniacs have. For everyone else, the answers to the questions of the day change depending on events. For the Nats the answer is always the same.

The country may just be emerging from a pandemic, but Sturgeon and co. have decided this is the right time to have another bitter, costly, energy-sapping independ-



'I feel sorry for the Scots — held in the United Kingdom against their will.'

ence vote. 'But the EU vote changes things,' they say. Nonsense. The Nats would still be calling for Scottish independence had we voted Remain.

There are those who think that Boris Johnson should call Sturgeon's bluff on this, call a referendum fast, win it and then put the matter to bed. But apart from the worrying number of variables in that, the problem is that the Nats will never put this matter to bed. They will always have a reason to rip the United Kingdom apart. They won't put it to bed until they have their way and destroy a union they have no right to destroy.

Ah, I hear some residue Remainers say. But wasn't that exactly what the rest of you did when you voted for Brexit? It is a charge that some people — not least the continental papers — now delight in levelling. Still the answer is 'no'. Our relationship with the EU was not an ancient treaty forged centuries ago. It did in fact go down the middle of our country far more than some of us realised. But consider the impact it had, and the fact that it was about a deal made in the lifetime of most people in this country: a deal whose nature changed while we were inside it, and which as a result we got out of. And then compare it to the bitterness and hatred caused in these islands if the nationalists got their way. There may be many good things to be said about the EU. But it is not one of the most successful political unions in history. The United Kingdom is.

In the support for Sturgeon from some surprising quarters and her building-up as the great counter to Johnson, a clear air of vengeance can be heard. Sturgeon is a great opportunist and seems perfectly happy to be used as a weapon of violence against a union which she hates. The story is already laid out for her and anyone else who hates this country. The UK voted to leave the EU, and then fell apart at home. What a wonderful story that would be to tell children across Europe, and everywhere else, for generations to come. To make them behave and stay in place, to agree to whatever they are told and not object to whatever comes their way next. It would be told as a great tragedy. And it would be. But it can be avoided. And it must be. It is not written.

Now we're talking

The rules of post-lockdown conversation

RACHEL JOHNSON

Long before Covid, it was bad enough when people (often City big dogs at 'Notting Hill Kitchen suppers') would ask 'So, do you do anything, or are you just a mum?' during my childbearing years.

Now, however, the pandemic has induced such chronic poverty in conversation that I recall those thrilling exchanges about house prices and schools as if I'd been at the Algonquin Round Table and not some dull catered dinner at a hedge-funder's 'mansion'. What a difference a long lockdown makes, eh.

Nobody has done anything or gone anywhere. All the craic has been about box sets... the time your Asos parcel went Awol... how you got a scam text from DHL... your attempt to cut your own hair after you'd had a takeaway negroni. Fair enough. I developed a mania for *Spiral* (at present I am in the thick of *Call My Agent*, French subtitles on) and became so irritating I would have divorced myself if I could. Yet 21 June, Independence Day, looms.

It's high time someone reset the post-lockdown rules of casual conversation, and I hereby appoint myself for this important national service. In ascending order of aggravation, here are the banned topics:

1) The vaccine. As the majority have now received Covid-19 vaccinations, it is not interesting to discuss how many of which job you've had, or whether you got a sore arm or felt a bit rubbish but only for a day or two.

2) Holidays. The hairdresser's question 'Going anywhere nice?' (or the barber's 'Something for the weekend, sir?') opens up a world of pain and uncertainty for us all, especially me. I don't want to hear you ask me to 'find out' — and we all know what that means — whether Corfu or Crete will be on the green or amber list come July.

3) Any mention of working from home. I don't want either to see you or picture you or your bookshelves and cheese plant in your home office on Zoom. Just no.

But the big one for me is the default conversational topic which to my mind is lazier than 'Are you just a mum?' or 'What do

you do?' It so maddens me that I was driven to email Debut's: 'Am doing a piece for *The Spectator* about conversational topics post-lockdown as there is nothing to talk about. In particular, I am absolutely resistant to answering the question 'How are the children?' when they are grown up etc, but there's not much else around. Do you have someone to guide me through U and Non-U topics? During walks especially it's boring to have to go through their CVs.'

A reply came from the etiquette expert's Lucy Hume: 'If talking about your children,

It is not interesting to discuss how many of which job you've had, or whether you got a sore arm

do so only to complain, and refrain from showing off about their achievements.

'Truth is, I would far rather spend hours talking to complete strangers on my LBC show about smart motorways than five minutes with auld acquaintances responding to their stock queries about my children: what they are doing, where they are living and so writer. 'People assume that you as a mother will be absolutely obsessed by your children and think they are being polite by asking,'



'I can remember when this was all Tier Four.'

explains Mary Killen of this parish. 'Don't forget people have got nothing to say.'

Of course, beloved grandparents, godparents, aunts and uncles and so on are excluded from my fatwa, but when people who've never met my adult children say 'So tell me all about what they're all up to', I have to restrain myself from snapping: 'One, they're not children any more, and two, you have no idea who they even are.'

As well as my bad temper, there have been further consequences of the verbal drought that has attended the viral pandemic. A little less conversation has led to a lot more action. There has been a double-digit rise (no dirty double-entendre intended) in sales of Durex condoms, the manufacturer Reckitt has just announced, which doesn't surprise me. Given the choice, I'm not surprised that people prefer to exchange body fluids than trivia.

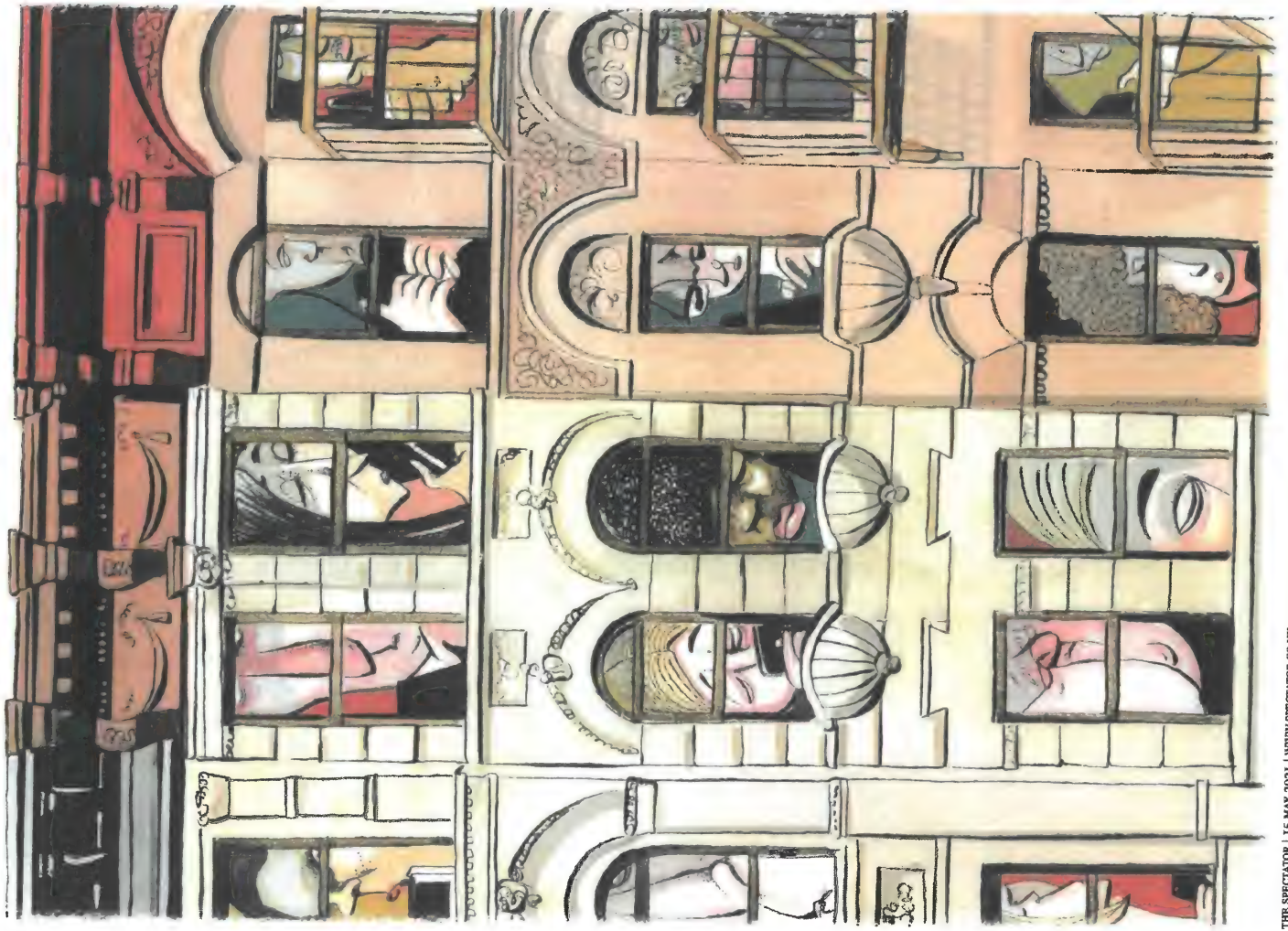
For those who don't want to go that far, meeting socially in person throws up genuine challenges, given nobody has any gossip or anecdotes and there is no fresh answer to the 'What have you been up to?' question since we have all been cowed into sheeplike compliance with Covid restrictions.

'I have always enjoyed meeting friends for lunch or dinner, sometimes in a restaurant, sometimes in my house or theirs, but now I'm nervous about doing so,' Jenni Murray revealed to *Daily Mail* readers recently. 'Will it be safe? Will it be legal? Will we have anything to talk to them about apart from Line of Duty?'

We will — and here's how. It used to be the case that sex, religion and politics were the traditionally forbidden topics. 'One of our taboo topics was sex, but those who've been stuck at home with family might enjoy a vicarious taste of romance,' agreed Lucy Hume, when I asked her about the matter. With permission from Debut's, I am placing all these topics firmly back on the menu.

Rachel Johnson presents her LBC show on Sundays at 7 p.m.

THE SPECTATOR 15 MAY 2021 | WWW.SPECTATOR.CO.UK



LETTER FROM ISRAEL

Anshel Pfeffer



Jerusalem
Thomas Friedman has a lot to answer for. *The New York Times's* oracle has ruined, through overuse in his columns, the best source of local knowledge for journalists: the cab driver. No other hack can now quote his driver for fear of colleagues' ridicule. Which is a pity, because the cab drivers in Jerusalem are those rare creatures who not only regularly cross between the three deeply divided cities — Zionist Jerusalem, ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem and Palestinian Jerusalem — but also converse freely with the denizens of all three. I wouldn't be caught dead, of course, committing the cliché of quoting my driver, which was lucky because the one who drove me to Damascus Gate on Monday promised that by the end of the week, when the holy month of Ramadan is over, 'the kids will be back in school and people will be back at work and all the violence will calm down'. Six hours later, Hamas fired from Gaza seven rockets towards Jerusalem, followed by salvo after salvo at towns in southern Israel.

The first time I smelled 'skunk' — a crowd-control weapon used by the Israeli police — at a demonstration in the West Bank a decade ago, I thought it was a cross between a putrefying cow's carcass and raw sewage. It is the worst stench you will ever experience and even if you're lucky enough to avoid the putrid stream launched from a water-cannon, it will impregnate itself inside your nostrils and your mind. Strangely, the ingredients of Israel's riot-control liquid are just yeast and protein, fermented and mixed together in a secret formula. The smell is so awful that even American police departments, not known for their gentleness, have decided after inspecting the product not to purchase it. This month, as protests broke out in the Palestinian neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem, it was used in extra-judicious quantities around Damascus Gate, in between multiple charges of mounted police. And I discovered that it's even worse when mixed with horse manure.

Israel, most do not have full rights and cannot vote in national elections. But as residents of eastern Jerusalem, which was annexed by Israel 54 years ago, unlike the West Bank and Gaza, they have access to Israeli healthcare, social and local services, including a double jab of the Pfizer vaccine months ago. The availability of some of these services, however, leaves a little to be desired. As a result, daily conversations sometimes have a *Monty Python*-esque element of 'What have the Israelis ever done for us?' One source of tension in recent weeks has been the planned eviction of Palestinian families from the neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah as a result of a long legal battle waged against them by religious Jewish settlers who have already taken over a number of homes. 'To be honest, there are advantages to having the settlers here,' one of the Palestinian residents told me. 'I've lived here for 36 years and finally the city is regularly collecting the rubbish.'

One of the occupational hazards of reporting on Israeli affairs is having to constantly rewrite Benjamin Netanyahu's political obituary. As the polls predict him losing office at every election, magnificent essays are prepared in advance, only to be spiked when he somehow manages to survive. I know of at least two foreign correspondents once based in Jerusalem who still routinely update their Bibi obits hopefully, long after leaving this posting. This week it finally seemed about to happen. An unlikely coalition of right-wing, centrist, left-wing and Arab parties seemed poised to muster a coalition. Then came the escalation in Jerusalem and Gaza, which put their talks on hold. Perhaps indefinitely. Unless there's a ceasefire, soon, Netanyahu may well live to fight another election. That's 2,500 well-crafted words of mine that will never see the light of day.

Anshel Pfeffer is a correspondent for British and Israeli newspapers and the author of Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Damascus Gate became a pitched battlefield because of the new chief of police's idiotic idea at the start of Ramadan to place metal fences around the sunken plaza leading to the gate. It's not only the main gathering place for coffee and cigarettes during the long Ramadan nights, once the daily fast is over, but also a central thoroughfare to the Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. The Palestinian youth were not going to allow the Zionists to encroach on Damascus Gate and by the time the police realised their mistake and removed the fences, another round of Israeli-Palestinian violence in the century-long conflict had kicked off. The rage spread this week, with hundreds of Palestinian rockets being lobbed at Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv. Israeli air force more than matched them in retaliatory air strikes. On the streets, meanwhile, Jewish and Arab mobs have been on the rampage.

The gate is also the place to buy the two best types of hummus anywhere in the world. There's the tiny stall of Akrimawi, for the purists who prefer a sweeter, smoother, tahini-rich blend, and next door the much larger Al-Ayed restaurant for the more tangy, slightly herbal version. Al-Ayed is also open 24 hours a day, serving day-labourers on their way to the nearby bus station, and insomniac writers. During the long hours of the fast, the seating areas are closed, but both establishments continued throughout the rioting to conduct a brisk takeaway business, for eating at home in the evening. The smell was too awful to sit and eat on the spot anyway.

Palestinians in Jerusalem live in a strange limbo. Unlike Arab citizens of

The writing's on the wall



Towards the end of April, my mum sent me a letter. She doesn't write as a rule — we speak on the phone — but this time she sent something. It's hard to explain the effect her handwriting had on me after so many months of being apart. It was as if she was there, in envelope form, on the doormat.

And because her handwriting's been so familiar for so long, it wasn't simply my mum as she is now, but Mum through three decades. I stood there in the gloom of the hall, vertiginous with memory, and I realised how unlikely it is that any future generation will have this same experience.

I'm Generation X, the last of the analogue gang, brought up on handwriting. Our things weren't encoded, they were imprinted: records and tapes. We had calligraphy sets, and as teens hand-wrote self-conscious love letters. Our crime dramas, back in the 1990s, inevitably involved a graphologist who could spot a psycho by the deviant slant of his writing. Psychos always wrote notes in those days. I have a feeling that the FBI and our Special Branch actually did employ graphologists back then, though I hope I'm wrong. We were the last generation to be snotty about fountain pens: 'No, sorry, you can't borrow it. You'll ruin the nib.' And we'll be the last to understand what it is to recognise someone so completely in the slants and loops of their handwriting.

Handwriting is fading, that's a fact. Though British schools still teach joined-up cursive script, in America it's optional, up to each individual state, and many of them don't see the point. If handwriting's taught at all it's printed writing — each letter separate and isolated, and most children type their notes. Typing is less discriminatory, they say, and what's the point of anything else? The future is via keyboard. Schoolchildren don't practise their signatures anymore; in fact banks complain that the kids don't even have signatures these days. And even if they do, they write their essays all kids communicate via text.

The 21st century is the age of the smartphone and its camera. Teens take selfies. Parents take photos of children, obsessively, grimly though no one can now remember why. There are 9,000 photos on my phone, as I swipe back — not one of them as evocative as a single handwritten line.

A photo contains a moment, often a fraudulent one. 'Smile darling, come on, just do it.' Handwriting, even just the sight of it, summons a person, and sometimes, because handwriting is heritable, it summons their ancestors too. In my family, handwriting is matrilineal. My mum's handwriting contains within it the echo of her sister's; they both write like their mother, and her mother too. As I stood there in the hall, having my Proustian moment, Mum's dashing capitals brought back my grandmother's postcards, her handwritten recipes, the bird's labels stuck to frozen joints of meat. As I wrote this, by hand, I could see my words pulled into familiar matriarchal shapes.

No one quite knows why handwriting runs in families. There's some speculation

A photo contains a moment, often a fraudulent one. Handwriting, even just the sight of it, summons a person

that it's to do with bones and muscles — the way your inherited hand holds a pen. Others think it's unconscious copying. I don't expect it'll be worth anyone's while to find out now.

The best book on handwriting that I can find oddly doubles as a rousing cheer for its demise — perhaps because the author's son (she admits) found handwriting hard. We're living through a transitional moment, says Anne Trubek, in *The History and Uncertain Future of Handwriting*. Yes, handwriting is on its way out, but we're living through a golden age of writing too, almost as a direct result. 'Although we may disagree on the merits and demerits of cursive instruction... most Americans write hundreds if not thou-



'Is this allowed under current Covid restrictions?'

sands more words a day than they did ten or 20 years ago. We have supplanted much talking and phone calling with texting, emailing and social media. One of the most surprising aspects of the digital revolution, in fact, is how very text-based it has been.'

I like Anne's optimism, but there's writing and writing. I read, in another academic pean to text messaging, that emojis have added back into texted life a sense of the fun and individual character that handwriting once allowed. This is clearly cobblers. Emojis make any messages not more different but more horribly uniform. Those nasty little faces impose their own distinctive character on a text, obscuring the sender, and in my book they're borderline demonic. That one with the sinister blind heart eyes, that sly face blowing sideways kisses. Is it even possible to blow a kiss and wink simultaneously?

'Perhaps, in the future we'll teach handwriting in art class, and encourage calligraphers as we do letter-press printers and stained-glass-window makers. These arts have a life beyond nostalgia,' suggests Trubek, in the manner of someone who, having safely buried a body, places a flower on the grave. But I don't want uniform handwriting or calligraphy. I want the look of each person's individual hand. I want that weird feeling that they're present in each stroke.

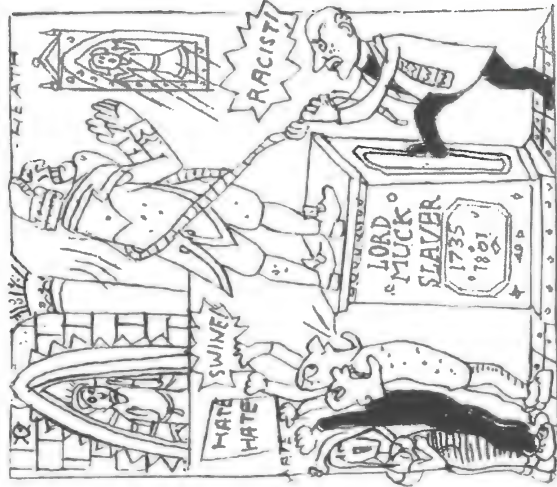
Handwriting won't vanish straight away, that's for sure. There won't be a poignant interview with the England's last hand-writer come 2050, because, as Trubek says, different forms of communication can coexist and overlap. They always have. The printing press didn't kill handwriting, it pretty much invented it. The professional scribes who once copied out books were stuck for work when the presses started up, so they taught handwriting to the masses.

On Monday, when cafés open up again, there will be people swiping and tapping; people muttering through their masks at Siri. Ladies with biro doing Sudoku, students underlining texts. The shift away from handwriting will bring about losses. But those losses will also give rise to changes — in accessibility, in democratisation, in advantages unimaginable to us now — that should be celebrated, says Trubek. I can't celebrate it. I can perhaps accept it.

Stone deaf

In the wake of a pandemic, why is the C of E obsessing about statues?

DANIEL FRENCH



The Church of England has once again misunderstood the mood of the nation. Guidance published this week urges the country's 12,500 parishes and 42 cathedrals to address, search out, assess and remove offensive artefacts of 'contested heritage'. The framework follows the call by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, for a review of church statues. Of course racism must be taken seriously, but I doubt I was the only cleric who, upon hearing this development, let out a loud groan.

The edict is both a concession to advocates of divisive identity politics and a distraction from the more pressing issues on which the church should be focused. Covid unleashed untold misery and suffering across Britain, with the church being afforded a chance to play a leading role in healing divisions and championing national positivity. Instead of embracing this opportunity, precious time, energy and resources are being wasted on this misguided adoption

tion of critical race theory. Becky Clark, the C of E's director of churches and cathedrals, told the *Today* programme that the issue is about making sure 'everyone feels welcome' in our churches. Such platitudes are redundant: in my 25 years of ministry, I have never heard a parishioner complain of feeling unwelcome because of a monument.

It is particularly galling that the guidance appears to run directly counter to Christian-

Is digging up the wrong things of historical figures the best use of church time and resources?

ity's core message of forgiveness. It is possible that in my parish there are monuments to dodgy dukes, nasty nobles and pilfering privateers who creamed off profits from slavery and colonial excesses. A cursory investigation might put them in the 'bad books', but how do I know whether or not

they made reparation, or even last-minute confession? Who am I to judge what happened centuries back, let alone what might have occurred in the secrets of people's hearts? Who is anyone to judge? They are being posthumously put in the dock without the possibility of redress.

With the pressure to tick boxes, it would be all too easy to hurriedly chisel out a monument so as to erase figures from history without fully checking all the facts. This goes against the teaching of the church to not only forgive, but to see the best in people while giving the benefit of the doubt. Nothing in life is ever black and white.

And where will such identity politics lead us? Who is to say that the list of undesirables will be confined to historical figures involved in colonialism and the slave trade? Might it end up being expanded to include those judged to have had personality flaws and moral failings? Once the winds of change start to blow, they are

very hard to stop. It is not unthinkable, for instance, that the momentum could edge towards removing reference in churches to any historical figure we might now accuse of misogyny or homophobia. With such mission creep, it is difficult to see who would be left. The majority of our most noted Britons would fail the test. They would include 1,000 years of royal blue blood. There is a rather striking stained-glass window of Henry VIII in Canterbury Cathedral's chapter house — perhaps a 'review' of that could get the ball rolling.

History shows that even milder forms of iconoclasm are potential gateways into darker tendencies. One does not need to know the intricacies of the Culte de la Raison to recognise how the banality of bureaucracy can tip into a festival of destruction. Do Anglicans want to give the green light to a mob free-for-all? If this sounds alarmist then a cursory visit to many of our universities will show what our genteel Anglicanism could descend into. Sadly the declining Episcopal Church in America is already there, and friends speak of a prevailing atmosphere of fear for anyone who considers stepping out of line to the new orthodoxy.

Even if one were to accept the mistaken premise that churches need to assess their



'We're entering a boom period.'

monuments is digging up the wrongdoings of historical figures the best use of church time and resources? After the bleakness of the pandemic, we should be supporting our hurting and grieving parishes — par-

Should I spend the next year pacing around my churches with a clipboard weighing up obscure monuments?

ticularly when it comes to the issue of mental health. Teenagers and young adults have taken the biggest psychological hit, and they desperately need our guidance, help and support. The church cannot afford the luxury of distractions and displacement

projects, especially one as misguided as this. Part of me is so frustrated that I want to jump in the car and race up to London to find any prelate lurking in Lambeth Palace or Church House and ask: 'Where do you want me to invest my energies? Should I spend the next year pacing around my four churches with a clipboard weighing up obscure gravestones and monuments, or do you want me engaging full-on with the mass of folks approaching me online who are longing for spiritual insight? Realistically, I cannot do both.' The irony is that a recent report from the General Synod clearly identified burnout due to too many expectations as a major cause of concern for clergy. How is this guidance supposed to help, exactly?

The very rare instances of wholly inappropriate monuments should be dealt with, if absolutely necessary, using common sense at a local level. It doesn't require centralised guidance. The public will not forgive the church easily for diverging into some hard-left ideological project. If we do this, while shamefully ignoring those suffering at a time of national crisis, then we shall be throwing reason and nuance out of the stained-glass window. Our parishes will be all the poorer for it.

Daniel French is an Anglican priest in Salcombe.



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China has peaked

Sir: Niall Ferguson makes some good points about the nature of Xi Jinping's imperial aspirations but misses two important parts of the picture ('The China model', 8 May). First, the Chinese Academy of Science predicts that China's population will peak at 1.4 billion in 2029, drop to 1.36 billion by 2050, and shrink to as few as 1.17 billion people by 2065. They even forecast that China's population might be reduced by about 50 per cent by the turn of the next century. And second, China's economic rise is stalling. Rather than being on track to displace the United States as the next economic superpower, China now finds itself ensnared in a classic 'middle income trap' — a situation in which rapid growth is followed by a period of stalled growth and failure to achieve the status of high-income country. As a result, China is not fated to become the world's economic middle kingdom. Indeed, it will be lucky if it escapes the fate of countries like Brazil and South Africa that have also fallen into this economic trap.

The bottom line is that while China's rise has been meteoric and strategically consequential, it is not destined to continue. China has already peaked and is destined to falter — and to do so long before displacing the US as the world's leading power. This week, the most recent census shows China's population growing at its slowest pace in decades. The question that should keep US strategic thinkers up at night is how America should deal with a China that is beginning to sense that the brass ring of global primacy is fated to recede from its grasp. Ominously, the world's experience with similar faltering contenders — Germany in 1914 and Japan in 1941 — suggests that when a dominant power assumes it is confronting a rising power when actually it is confronting a faltering contender, catastrophic war can ensue.

Andrew A. Latham

Professor of International Relations and Political Theory, Macalester College, USA

Deflecting blame

Sir: Having read the 'From Lament to Action' report, it is very hard to swallow the simplistic defence offered by the Revds Arora and Barron (Letters, 8 May) against Michael Nazir-Ali's penetrating critique ('Bad faith', 1 May). Glossing with biblical quotations a hermeneutic analysis borrowed from a political theory intended to destroy not only the traditional family but society and Christianity as well will not cut it, and shows either the naivety or the disingenuousness of the

authors. One is left wondering whether this is another exercise in deflecting blame from the shameful failures of the C of E leadership by branding the rest of the church racist, white-privileged, and in need of unconscious bias training. Institutional incompetence, yes; institutional corruption, perhaps; secrecy and saving face, certainly.

*The Revd R.C. Paget
Brenchley, Kent*

Moore and moor

Sir: West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service want to ensure accurate reporting of our role, particularly regarding the Marsden Moor fire to which Charles Moore referred (Notes, 1 May). I must highlight firstly the use of the outdated term 'firemen'. Our increasingly diverse workforce comprises both men and women who work as 'firefighters'. We work closely with landowners and interested parties to protect our beautiful moorland. We campaign to promote moorland fire safety, and work with our partners to enforce legislation.

Finally, our crews did not 'knock off at 8 p.m.' as reported. It is accepted good

practice to minimise numbers on the moor in hours of darkness. The natural temperature drop suppresses the fire and allows for a watching brief and reduced firefighting activity, with the provision to increase resources again if needed, before we ramp back up during daylight hours.

Dave Walton

Deputy chief fire officer/director of service delivery, West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue

Isolated incidents

Sir: As much as stress and 'mental health issues' are flavours of the month, I don't agree that the problem is overstated just now ('Britain's mental health problem', 8 May). In the past year my husband and I have dealt — as mere amateurs and friends — with three different people considering or attempting suicide. That's three more than in the past 40 years of welcoming many people through our home. I know you can't use anecdotes as evidence, but it's blatantly obvious that each of these three situations was exacerbated by isolation.

S. Rose

Edinburgh

Corporate pass-agg

Sir: Fiona Mountford is too generous to 'the providers' ('Customer disservice', 8 May). Usually, they do not apologise for 'the' inconvenience caused but rather for 'any' inconvenience. Presumably the genesis lies in advice from in-house lawyers who wish to make the actual incidence of inconvenience deniable in case of customer claims. The subtext is 'We reject your assertion of inconvenience but we're sorry you feel that way', displaying the passive aggression Ms Mountford identifies. It has annoyed me for decades.

*Dr Julian Critchlow
Ditcham, Hampshire*

The sound of spring

Sir: Charles Moore mourns not hearing the cuckoo in April for the first time in his life (Notes, 1 May) and questions whether the unseasonably cold spring is the cause. Sadly, the real reason for the cuckoo's decline is the result of modern farming techniques which over the years have destroyed its main source of food, the hairy caterpillar. Here in rural Dorset I have not heard the evocative call announcing spring's arrival for three years. Yet on a visit to Exmoor in April a couple of years ago the air resonated to the sound of cuckoos on the natural moorland.

Julian Bunkall

Buckland Newton, Dorset

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Top pay restraint may persist over here – but not in the US



Consider a temporary cut in executive salaries' was the Confederation of British Industry's advice to members at the start of the pandemic. Back then I was gripped by fears of a backlash against capitalism: top pay cuts would indeed be wise, I wrote, not least because 'sacrifice now is sensible insurance'.

Looking at last week's election results, I needn't have been concerned about a second coming of socialism. But I'm one of many advocates for responsible capitalism who have long worried about growing disparities between executive and average pay – the key multiple having risen from 50 to 120 over the past two decades – that rarely reflect underlying performance. The pandemic offered an opportunity for rational restraint in the guise of social solidarity. We can now begin to see how companies on both sides of the Atlantic responded; the difference is instructive.

In the UK, analysis by PwC found a median 22 per cent fall, to £3.5 million, in total pay of chief executives of 50 FTSE 100 companies. Many have also 'taken an axe to 2021 long-term incentive plans', says the *Financial Times*. These trends have set benchmarks for shareholder rebellions on pay awards in companies such as Rio Tinto, Glencore, Pearson and Flutter, the online betting giant.

In the US, by contrast, boards mostly took their cue from President Donald Trump and paid bosses even more, despite window-dressing cuts to base salaries that are a small portion of total rewards: the *Wall Street Journal* found median pay for 300 US chief executives up from \$12.8 million to \$13.7 million and 'on track for a record'.

What next? Over here, I suspect restraint will persist without nudging from Downing Street, because institutional investors have the bit between their teeth and will keep pressure on companies that look out of line. Over there, President Joe Biden defends his proposed tax hikes on profits and wealth, declares 'trickle-down has never worked' and waxes eloquent on the top-to-average

pay ratio: 'Tell me what benefit flows from that.' But I suspect corporate America and its Congressional friends will thwart him, rewards will continue to soar – and the US will, as usual, lead the global recovery. That's the great moral conundrum of capitalism.

To waive or not to waive

Biden's new-found support for a temporary waiver of Covid vaccine patents raises another fascinating set of questions. World Health Organisation chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus makes the case for a waiver in terms of overwhelming priorities and the inequitable distribution of doses to date – 80 per cent to the richest countries. Economic pragmatists add that the faster the whole world is vaccinated, the sooner global trade, including demand for exports from the rich West, will also recover.

Opponents, led by Angela Merkel, argue that a waiver is an expropriation of intellectual property that would discourage future drug innovation without guaranteeing significant new ammunition for the battle against Covid, because most poorer countries do not have the capacity or know-how to manufacture high-quality vaccines. Industry voices add that a waiver could hand western biotech secrets to habitual IP abusers such as China and Russia. Meanwhile, some observers think Biden is merely grandstanding to win favour with left-wing Democrats, knowing that a waiver will take too long to achieve consensus within the World Trade Organisation and may never happen at all.

What's the answer? Any nation that's well advanced in its vaccination programme and has over-ordered should stop hoarding and start sending spare batches abroad. 'Big Pharma' should be incentivised to make more vaccine licensing agreements and joint ventures in faraway places – but also to maintain research spending at home, in order to stay ahead of the next pandemic. A patent waiver should be available only to countries where Covid is raging,

IP is respected, and there's capacity for immediate production. But how easy it is for your columnist to type these solutions; and how hellishly difficult it would be for real-life interested parties to agree on them.

Soriot's a hero

The topics of vaccine manufacture and executive reward collide in Pascal Soriot, chief executive of AstraZeneca. Soriot took home £15 million last year (Pfizer boss Albert Bourla earned a similar figure), having driven spectacular returns for AZ's shareholders relative to its sector since he arrived in 2012. But a proposal to increase his maximum bonus and long-term share awards met 40 per cent opposition at this week's AGM.

French-born Soriot has become a controversial figure because of AZ's standoff with the EU over vaccine supplies and concerns over the incidence of blood clotting in its vaccine recipients. Let's remember, however, that his company was the only major manufacturer to have offered mass-produced vaccine at no profit for the duration of the pandemic, and at just \$3 per dose compared with \$15 for a Pfizer shot. 'We never pretended we would be perfect,' he said recently, '[but] we did our very best to help the world.' The one thing AZ shareholders might hold against him, in fact, is the no-profit offer for which the world seems so ungrateful.

Road rage

Six-hour airport queues for those brave enough to attempt a holiday abroad. All-day jams across London thanks to unfinished roadworks, new cycle lanes and the scandal of Crossrail. And now weeks of rail disruption caused by hairline cracks in the undercarriages of Hitachi high-speed trains. Freedom beckons, everyone wants to be on the move – and the new normal will be a summer of endless, rage-inducing transport chaos.

BOOKS & ARTS

Adam Begley enjoys the cacophony of New Yorkers yakking

Paul Levy argues that there's nothing cruel about force-feeding geese

Allan Mallinson wonders why the only person Stalin trusted should have been Hitler

Graeme Thomson says rumours of Van Morrison's demise are greatly exaggerated

Lloyd Evans thinks he's found the new Fleabag

James Delingpole is amazed how faithful and intelligent *The Pursuit of Love* is



*'Still Life with Asparagus',
1697, Adriaen Coorte
Daisy Dunn — p47*

BOOKS

A nation of chancers

Alex Burghart describes England's fitful development from a collection of warring kingdoms into a highly centralised state

The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England

by Marc Morris

Hutchinson, £25, pp. 464

The title of Marc Morris's new history makes me want to get up and dance a little jig. The modern Inquisition has been jabbing its finger at the term 'Anglo-Saxon', accusing it of thought crime and threatening it with the cucking stool. (At least one august history society in the US has renamed itself in response.) Bad people have no doubt used the word, but Alfred the Great (871–99) and Æthelstan (924–39), among others, identified as such, and so contemporary historians have a reasonable case for using it too. Bravo Mr Morris for getting on with it. Having spent many years at academic conferences around the world, I can reassure readers that if today's Anglo-Saxon scholars are closet white supremacists, their cover is pretty darn deep.

Undertaking a single-volume history of the Anglo-Saxon period is a sufficiently unmean feat that few have found the energy for it. Doing so requires an evaluation of some six centuries of British history — from the influx of German types at the end of Roman Britain c. 400 through to William the Conqueror's rude arrival in 1066 — roughly the same length of time as from now back to the Battle of Agincourt. A lot happened, most of it unpredictable, obscured by the passage of time and the loss of primary sources.

Since the Anglo-Saxons at the outset lived in such a markedly different world to those at its close, one might ask whether they deserve to be considered together. The departure of Rome's legions precipitated a catastrophe for which there is no parallel in British history. Late Roman Britain had towns built in stone, Christianity, writing, currency, hot water and central heating. Within a few generations, a ragtag of barbarous kingdoms occupied lowland Britain: the towns were empty, the gods were many, literacy had departed, there was no coinage and everyone was speaking Saxon and taking cold showers. By 1066,

there was a highly centralised nation state called England with a single royal family, a regulated currency and a national church.

Finding the thread that runs through such a long and varied period is not easy, and those who have tried in the past have tended to do so with a purpose. Post-Conquest (and post-Reformation) churchmen looked to Anglo-Saxon England as a place of conversion, learning and almost prelapsarian piety. Mutton-chopped Victorians sought to establish it as the cradle of England's manifest destiny as top nation. Such prisms being out of fashion, how now to approach the Anglo-Saxons?

Morris's is 'an account of the emergence of the English and the development of England'. This he delivers with

Soon after the Romans left, towns emptied, the coinage and literacy vanished and everyone spoke Saxon.

gusto through the stories of vivid characters in consecutive periods, using their lives as windows on to a changing world. Warring ring-givers, pompous prelates with military refinements, dyke-building Mercians with grand designs, Viking-besieged ealdormen, filthy-promiscuous juvenile kings — all are here in gay array. Canilly assembling his stories around the richest sources, Morris creates a highly engaging account in which, by degrees, the English and their kingdom emerge. This is top-notch narrative history, one that rests on an admirably *au courant* bibliography and is remarkably sure-footed on crumbly historiographical terrain.

A doyen of post-Conquest kings, Morris has an excellent feel for faction and nimbly picks his way around the complex court politics of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy as it competed and combined like angry, amorous mink on heat. Different gangs of royals, toffs and bishops out and eclipse one another as kings and their favourites grow old or die. Clergy build ecclesiastical empires through tickling patrons' tummies or sucking up to their wives. Kings marry

off sisters and daughters to neighbours and then find opportunities to take offence and invade.

Morris's England is thus a nation of chancers — one that was bashed together in fits and starts by big men crashing into each other. This was undoubtedly true. Between the 7th century and the 10th, petty Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Essex, Wessex, Sussex, Kent, Mercia, Deira, Bernicia, Elmet etc.) swallowed each other up until there was but one England ruled by the heirs of Alfred the Great. Such a tale can tend towards teleology, not least because it served the purposes of early medieval thinkers to present it that way. But the perennial spats, rebellions and invasions Morris describes made a centralised nation far from inevitable, causing, as they did, the partial disintegration of the kingdoms of Alfred's son Edward the Elder (in 924), his grandson Æthelstan (in 939) and another grandson Eadwig (in 957). Moreover, the country became vulnerable as a result to the predations of prowling Danes — ultimately, in the reigns of Æthelred the Unready (d. 1016) and Edmund Ironside (d. 1016) to the point of conquest by Sweyn Forkbeard and his son Cnut.

Beneath the dangerous, bitchy inconsistencies of court diplomacy, however, more stable foundations were being sunk. If the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* are to be believed, between 991 and 1018, Danish armies were paid 240,500 lb of silver. If this reveals the weakness of the Unready king, it is also indicative of the strength of his kingdom. Large amounts of money, indeed vast sums, could be extracted from taxpayers very quickly.

This was because there was a highly regulated coinage, struck by royal command, which washed through every part of England. Archaeology allows us to calculate that by the 11th century tens of millions of coins were being produced and used by both high and low. (There is a story of a scribe who was offered payment in gold, silver, animals, wine or cash. 'Count out the coins,' he said.) From 973, under kingy supervision, every few years the currency

A moving target Bryan Karetnyk

The Passenger
by Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz,
translated by Philip Boehm
Pushkin Press, £14.99, pp. 256

'They'll slowly undress us first and then kill us, so our clothes won't get bloody and our banknotes won't get damaged.' These words, spoken by Otto Silbermann in Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz's *The Passenger*, are startling. Not because they so perfectly articulate the obscene ethos of Auschwitz but because they were written several years before the fact.

Composed in 1938, after its author had escaped the more murderous developments of Hitler's regime, *The Passenger* is a tense, nightmarish account of one Jewish man's attempt to survive in a country that is systematically stripping him of his right to exist. Initially blind to the dangers around him, Silbermann, a respectable businessman, suddenly finds his familiar environment transformed into a perilous hunting ground when a group of browshirts come pounding on his door. Having given them the slip, he adopts an unlikely stratagem: to turn himself into a moving target and take to the Reichsbahn.

With an eye for sinister tension redolent of Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock, Boschwitz subjects his hero to a series of nerve-racking encounters on the railways. Shunned by former associates, friends and even family, he boards one train after another, tearing across the length and breadth of Germany in a sleepless race that grows more desperate each minute. As the money in his briefcase dwindles, so the fugitive sinks from first class, to second, to third, each journey stripping him of his illusions and his identity, each minute bringing him closer to the inevitable realisation: that he has long since lost 'the right to be an ordinary human being'.

By turns claustrophobic, dizzying and symbolic, *The Passenger* is a work with sufficient pace to be a thriller, yet possessed of enough nuance and psychological depth to be of real literary weight. As the clock ticks ominously on, and the strain of Silbermann's terrible momentum takes its toll, his journeys acquire an ever more labyrinthine, Kafkaesque quality, casting light on the truly diabolical horror of a regime that entraps and brutalises its own citizens.

To see Boschwitz's haunting tale written before the outbreak of war and the horrors of the camps is breathtaking. But if there is one thing that this newly discovered classic makes clear, it is that its vision of the barbarism about to take place was no prophecy: the writing was already on the wall, if only one dared to read it.



Offa, King of Mercia (577–796), one of the most powerful Anglo-Saxon rulers before Alfred the Great, is depicted with the church of St Albans, which he founded as a Benedictine monastery in 793. (From the Benefactors Book of St Albans Abbey, c. 1380)

was recalled, reminted and renewed. Such huge undertakings indicate effective coordination and central organisation.

The Anglo-Saxon institutional legacy is, by any assessment, substantial. It bequeathed the monarchy, the currency, the shires, the towns, the law, and both the fact and the idea of England. Morris nods to these developments but does not always give them the recognition they deserve for building a remarkably sophisticated and resilient early medieval state that has lasted a millennium. That longevity requires explanation. King Edgar (d. 975) proclaimed that 'every man, whether rich or poor, is to be entitled to the law, and just judgments are to be judged for him'. In his reign a huge system of very local courts, the hundred courts, based on subdivisions of shires, became visible. These could only function with the cooperation of large numbers of ordinary

people participating in the workaday life of the kingdom. Theirs was the forum that provided law, taxes and men for war, and it was on them that rulers depended. This

Rival gangs of royals, nobles and bishops ousted one another, as kings and their favourites grew old or died

coupling of kings and common folk was durable indeed, a sort of hardwired social contract that was easily transferable to different ruling dynasties, enabling England to survive all manner of traumas.

Nevertheless, Morris has produced an impressive volume, a big gold bar of delight, the special joy of which is that the florid world of Anglo-Saxon England will become known to many. As an up-to-date, accessible narrative history of the period, I know of none better.

New Yorkers yakking

Adam Begley

New Yorkers: A City and Its People in Our Time

by Craig Taylor
John Murray, £25, pp. 398

New York is a nutshell? No way. New York in a New York minute? Forget about it. The city contains multitudes: it contradicts itself, wantonly. Any attempt to summarise will fail. Not even Craig Taylor's delightful cacophony of voices, dozens and dozens of them spilling their New York stories, can compass its vastness and variety. But what a tasty slice Taylor serves up! Until you can fly into JFK and see, hear and smell for yourself, savour the grit, sweat in the choking humidity and shiver in the canyonised midtown winds — until then, his *New Yorkers* is just the ticket.

This is Taylor's second anthology of urban voices. It follows more or less exactly in the footsteps of *Londoners* (2011) which was widely and warmly praised. Here he interviews people from all over the city and from every point on the spectrum: banker and bum, window-washer and push interior designer, subway conductor and private tutor, personal injury lawyer and ice consultant, painter and private cook, landlord and elevator repairman, cabbie and radio presenter, dancer and dentist, student and retiree. A few of the more eccentric individuals defy classification: one is a 'healer', another a 'recycler'. Some are thrillingly articulate, others borderline incomprehensible. Almost all are weirdly compelling and weirdly compelling, as though each had a touch of the Ancient Mariner.

Taylor makes use of an unobtrusive framing device: a story, told in three instalments, of a difficult friendship with a homeless man, Joe, a battered Vietnam vet who hates New York but can never leave. Joe is not just a prop; he has his own rage, his joy, his humanity. An artfully understated storyteller with a compelling voice of his own, Taylor shows us just enough of himself to answer a question the reader can't help asking: how did he get all these folk to open up? The trick is empathy, clearly, and also knowing when to button his lip. He learns from his interviews:

All these encounters brought with them lessons on how to live. And also how to shut up. In these years of increasing volume I had so many great reasons to stay quiet and bear witness.

But the book, a succession of arias arranged like an epic opera, is emphatically not about him. He steps back to let his New Yorkers yak, and so should I.

A therapist revealing a perennial preoccupation of her clients:

'They blame New York... Trust me, the city is involved in almost every session I have. It's

constantly in the room in a way that I'm not sure any other city would be... And always talk of moving, moving, moving.

A nanny ranting about the 'economy of cool' and its impact on her rich clients' kids:

'They have to be aggressively cool for the rest of their lives. That's the option you give your child. "I'm really into pesto." "I import vinaigrette." You know, they're gonna have some weird, niche, useless, empty job.

A cop:

Nobody puts makeup on their hands, so your hands are like a window to your inner health. The way people's hands shake when they're nervous... Fidgeting hands, hardworking hands, delicate hands. It's amazing the shit you see. Articulating actions. They wouldn't get their hands out of their pocket, they kept going for their pocket. If someone's doing something bad, they're doing it with their hands. The hands tell it.

A used-car salesman who used to work in sanitation:

Aristotle, or one of the fucking philosophers, said it's better to be good than bad. I mean, I really don't know what that means, but it sounded good.

A fellow described as a 'pizza guide':

A New York crust is a little bit more dry. When you bend it in half, it doesn't snap on the bottom. There's a larger crumb structure, cell structure. This is a little dense of a cell structure. There's oil in this. Not a ton of yeast. It's hard to really put words to it, but you know it when you see it. You know a New York slice when you see it.

A high-flying sommelier:

I don't think I'd be able to accomplish what I've accomplished, or continue to do what I do, if I didn't live here. It's like some battery that you plug into. It's charged. It's amped.

A trans woman:

In my days I've met a lot of rich people through sex work. Wall Street guys love to get their ass beat. That's a thing. That trope is real.

A volunteer at a soup kitchen:

In the city there's people who don't give a damn, and other people who do. But everybody has to leave by the sidewalk, right? So that's where the real true human encounter happens. And so when you get acclimatised to the atmosphere on the street, or, jeez, in the subway... you begin to understand the city

I'VE NEVER BEEN THE HUGGING KIND



in a new way, and to see the people as they really are, each a kind of blossom. However fragrant.

Apparently Craig Taylor 'lives in western Canada', a phrase that's pretty much the antithesis of New York City, and brings to mind John Updike's *bon mot* about 'the true New Yorker's secret belief that people living anywhere else had to be, in some sense, kidding'.

I'd say Taylor deserves the keys to the city.

Forewarned, but not forearmed

Allan Mallinson

Barbarossa: How Hitler Lost the War

by Jonathan Dimbleby
Viking, £25, pp. 620

Barbarossa: And the Bloodiest War in History

by Stewart Birns
Wildfire, £20, pp. 400

The most extraordinary thing, still, about Operation Barbarossa is the complete surprise the Wehrmacht achieved. In the early hours of 22 June 1941 the largest invasion force in history, ultimately some three million men, struck at the Soviet Union on a front of nearly 2,000 miles. When Stalin was woken with the news, he wouldn't believe it. It couldn't be Hitler's doing, he insisted; surely just sabre-rattling by Wehrmacht generals? Hours passed before he would accept his calamitous misjudgments and issue a general order to fight back by every means.

Hitler's strategic challenge in the late 1930s had been essentially the same as the Kaiser's in 1914: how to make war simultaneously on two fronts. The Kaiser, thanks to a theoretical plan conceived 20 years earlier by the chief of the Orosier Generalstab, Alfred von Schlieffen, 'solved' the problem by tactics inspired by the Battle of Cannae, in which Hannibal annihilated a superior Roman army by encirclement, and Napoleon's strategy of the central position, designed to defeat two cooperating armies by concentrating force against one of them till it yielded, then turning to face the other. Schlieffen's plan entailed a holding operation on the Russian front while sending the bulk of the imperial German army through neutral Belgium to encircle the French. Thereafter the victorious army would entrain for east Prussia to deal with the slower-mobilising Russians. With such brilliant officers as there were on the General Staff in 1914, what could possibly go wrong?

But this elevated battlefield tactics to



German troops advance into Russia in 1941, the swastika serving as identification to their covering aircraft

lapse, which was more than Stalin was, or indeed the Red Army, whose leadership he'd extensively purged three years earlier.

Stalin dismissed warnings from Churchill (who had the benefit of Ultra) that the Germans were massing for an offensive. Warnings from Stalin's own agents were also dismissed as fantasies or provocations. Six days before the invasion, an officer in the German air ministry whom the NKVD had recruited in 1940, codename 'Starshina' (which Dimbleby translates infelicitously as 'Corporal'), warned that attack was imminent. Stalin scribbled on the report: 'Tell the source... to go fuck his mother! This is no source but a disinformant.' Dimbleby quotes Solzhenitsyn: Stalin didn't trust his own mother, God, fellow party members, peasants, workers, intellectuals, soldiers, relatives, wives, mistresses or even his own children. 'In all his long suspicion-ridden life he had only trusted one man... This man whom Stalin trusted was Adolf Hitler.'

With his impressive team of researchers, advisers and editors, Dimbleby tells the story of strategic miscalculation and (self-)deception on all sides, and then Hitler's 'war of extermination', magnificently.

It is Stewart Binns's misfortune perhaps that another and nominatively more celebrated former BBC man should simultaneously bring out a book with the same title. But in Binns's *Barbarossa*, the invasion is merely the first phase of the Soviets' war as a whole, in which the psyche of the Russian people, with whom he clearly has a close affinity, is key — so not just *Barbarossa*, but *Stalingrad*, the counter-offensives of 1943, the long slog to Berlin and the aftermath, which he relates with clarity and humanity. The Red Army, according to Binns, aren't all rapists, but the boot found in Marshal Zhukov's dacha in one of Stalin's post-war witch hunts does the image of the hero of the Great Patriotic War no good. Perhaps, though, the man who saved Stalin from his folly in June 1941 might be excused his 20 Holland and Holland shotguns, the huge canvases of nudes over his bed and the rest of the seven wagons of plunder he'd transported back to Moscow. Stalin confiscated it, but spared Zhukov the gulags.

Both these *Barbarossas* read wonderfully well.

Foreign Office's aversion to any accommodation with Moscow (ministers' aversion too; mercifully, he's no rehabilitator of Chamberlain), even once the Nazi threat was manifest.

After the Munich Agreement in 1938, which Stalin denounced, an Anglo-French-Soviet alliance was out of the question. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact followed, which only confirmed Whitehall's view that the two dictators were hand in glove. When

Stalin dismissed repeated warnings of Germany's impending attack as fantasies or provocations

the Soviets invaded Finland in December 1939, the Foreign Office wanted to send troops to aid the Finns, arguing that 'the complete downfall of Russian military power' was to Britain's advantage: 'The collapse of Russia was likely to contribute materially to the early defeat of Germany.' Dimbleby wonders how bureaucrats drew this 'bizarre conclusion'. In fact, it's perfectly clear if you follow the FO's logic (as far as it went), that 'the Soviets had settled down into an undeclared war' against Britain, partners in crime with the Nazis who thereby gained access to Russia's strategic raw materials. Fortunately, Churchill had long seen the essential ambivalence in the Pact and was ready for its sudden col-

the level of strategy. One of Hitler's best field marshals, Albert Kesselring, said the Kaiser's staff disdained 'anything to do with oil which soiled the fingers and hampered the tactician and strategist in the free flight of his ideas'.

Hitler knew he was cleverer than Schlieffen. He would sequence his moves better, retaining the initiative absolutely. Instead of fighting a hostage-to-fortune holding operation in the east, he'd arrange a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, leaving him free to defeat Britain and France when he chose, after which, when the time was right, he'd ignore the pact and turn his military attention east. Indeed, a pact would even allow him to occupy half of Poland, advancing his start-line towards the Soviet Union some 200 miles. With such a presiding genius, what could possibly go wrong?

To explain the whole complex story, Jonathan Dimbleby begins with the shock of the Rapallo Treaty of 1922, by which Germany and the Soviet Union established close relations. Rapallo enraged Lloyd George, for it scuppered his plans for European reconstruction, which he'd intended to seal at the conference in nearby Genoa at the very time the treaty was being secretly negotiated. It was the beginning of Whitehall's chronic mistrust of both Berlin and Moscow, the latter most of all. Dimbleby tracks with dismay the

In a state of flux

Julie Bindel

Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism

by Kathleen Stock
Fleet, £16.99, pp. 432

'Something is afoot', wrote the academic philosopher Kathleen Stock in 2018:

Beyond the academy, there's a huge and impassioned discussion going on around the apparent conflict between women-who-are-not-transwomen's rights and interests and transwomen's rights and interests. And yet nearly all academic philosophers — including, surprisingly, feminist philosophers — are ignoring it.

Material Girls picks up three years after Stock's initial musings, and feminist philosophers are knee-deep in debate. Or is debate permitted in matters of gender ideology?

During the past two decades there has been a concerted effort by the likes of Stonewall to override women's sex-based rights in favour of 'gender identity'. Trans ideology has become embedded within institutions and we are told that sex does not matter, that it is merely a social construct, unlike the ubiquitous 'gender', which feminists know is based on sexist stereotypes.

In 2004, the UK introduced the Gender Recognition Act, which provided much-needed legal protection for those living as the opposite sex. Six years later, gender reassignment was made a protected char-

acteristic under the Equality Act. Today, the number of transgender people in the UK has skyrocketed and the increase in girls being referred to the NHS Gender Identity Development Service is several thousand times higher than a few years ago.

An entire chapter is devoted to making a case that there actually exists a biological basis to sex — and who would have thought it necessary to ever do this? Unsurprisingly, since speaking out, Stock has been targeted by extremists, including many of her own colleagues, with accusations of 'transphobic bigotry' thrown around with impunity.

Disingenuous assertions by trans activists are easily dismantled, such as that the existence of intersex conditions proves there are more than two sexes. The likes

Stock has been targeted by extremists, with accusations of 'transphobic bigotry' thrown around with impunity

of the popular writer Anne Fausto-Sterling have convinced swathes of people that approximately one in 50 humans (1.7 per cent) are 'intersex' when this figure includes around 1.5 per cent of those who have congenital adrenal hyperplasia.

As well as critiquing the institutional and social protection to those harassing feminists, with the slur of Terf being bandied about in response to the slightest transgression, Stock makes it plain she has no truck with the small number of extremists on the 'gender critical' side of the argument.

Occasionally, the more theoretical sec-

tions can seem convoluted next to the descriptive ones, but in the main the tone is inclusive and conversational, with lovely snippets of dry humour. Observations such as 'there was a heavy lesbian presence, in the traditional same-sex sense' helps to break up some of the drier theoretical material.

There are also several examples of how far down the rabbit hole some of the gender ideology has gone, which Stock presents without ceremony. For example, the University of Kent's policy recognises and protects the gender identity 'demifluid'. This refers to people whose gender identity is partially fluid while other parts are static, which is different from 'demiflux', which is not the same because 'flux indicates that one of the genders is non-binary'.

I had hoped for a little more exploration of the direct hit taken by feminists fighting to end male violence, and was frustrated at some of the assumptions and inaccuracies about definitions of feminism. Stock has a tendency to conflate radical feminism with lesbian separatists, a group of feminists in the United States who opt out of mainstream society. She also mistakenly merges feminists and 'gender critical' activists, who may or may not have distasteful feminist politics and can as easily be Trump-supporting anti-vaxxers as those campaigning against male violence.

She writes with the style of an outsider looking in, but when she describes the culture of silencing and de-platforming within the academy it is clear she has come in for a fair bit of bullying herself. The philosopher Mary Leng and her theory of 'reverse Voltaire' — 'I agree with what you have to say, but will fight to the death to prevent you from saying it' — sums it up well.

There is a bit of a lost opportunity to examine how original, second-wave feminist theory has been distorted by trans rights activists. For example, in rightly critiquing 'standpoint epistemology', relied on by trans people to claim that only they can understand their own oppression, Stock appears to dismiss without qualification 'the personal is political' on which the second wave of feminism was built. Indeed, 'the personal is political' is often misunderstood as being about identity politics when it is about linking personal experience, such as domestic violence and unwanted sex, and larger social and political structures, such as patriarchy and female subservience.

Stock's pragmatic and empathetic suggestions for the way forward left me worried that we would have to rely on the goodwill of the trans lobbyists rather than a feminist revolution to bring us back to reality. But *Material Girls* is a meticulously researched and carefully argued case for returning reason in an increasingly unreasonable world.

— Flew Adcock

Optimistic Poem

It's been a while. Let me get used to it.
I knew about the widows, of course,
but hadn't quite expected the crutches,
the walking-frames, or that poor agitated
soul endlessly pacing at the front.
On the other hand, the baby chirruping
during the one minute's silence
could hardly have given any offence.

It's been a late, cold spring; last year's was
also cold and late, but it happened.
Normal operations are being resumed.
Someone has died, at nearly a hundred,
of natural causes. Weep, but not too much.
That white shower was not snow, but petals.



Watercolour by John Crowsley of Shakespeare's parish church, St Helen's, Bishopsgate, showing the 15th-century tombs of Sir John Crosby and his wife Agnes

Will's world Daniel Swift

**Living with Shakespeare:
Saint Helen's Parish, London,
1593-1598**

by Geoffrey Marsh

Edinburgh University Press, £25, pp. 502

Shakespeare's first biographer was the gossip antiquarian John Aubrey, who famously described the playwright as 'not a company keeper'. It has long been tempting to see him this way: Shakespeare the aloof genius, almost divine. There's something chilly in this vision, and scholarly work on Shakespeare of the past few decades has increasingly tended to picture him in different kinds of company. Academic studies now routinely investigate Shakespeare as a member of a group of players, or trace his links to patrons, his family and his rivals. By now it is generally accepted that Shakespeare's plays were collaborative; the scholarly squabbles are over how much and which bits of work his co-writers did. The lonely poet in his garret has been superseded by a man in the crowd.

Geoffrey Marsh's diffuse yet fascinating new book discovers Shakespeare in a small cluster of streets at the foot of what is now the Gherkin, but was in the 16th century the parish of St Helen's, Bishopsgate. Shakespeare's name appears on a Lay Subsidy Roll for this parish in October 1597. This is a listing of all those liable for tax, and it reveals

that Shakespeare must have lived here in the mid-1590s. This record has long been known to biographers, but Marsh's book is the first to dig deeply into all the other names alongside Shakespeare's. The parish was 'a thriving, wealthy, bustling community of perhaps 550-650 people', writes Marsh: 'It was full of wealthy merchants, textile traders and leatherworkers, with a scattering of MPs, gentry and artists.' These were Shakespeare's

*Shakespeare is assessed as
being richer than a plumber
but poorer than a skinner*

neighbours, who lived and worked around him as he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.

There's a lot of fun in this. Living in a grand house opposite Shakespeare was Sir John Spencer, the Lord Mayor of London, who was a cartoonishly villainous figure. He kidnapped his own daughter when she refused to marry a man of his choosing, and on his tombstone in the parish church is a statue of the daughter, kneeling but facing away from him. Another neighbour was a doctor who specialised in female sexuality and hysteria, and gave medical testimony at witchcraft trials. There were musicians and milliners, skinner, poulterers, traders in furs. People die of the plague. Some of this gets a little *Blackadder*-like, which is the usual curse of trying to describe Elizabethan London, and

which is not helped by the discovery that Shakespeare's parish priest was named John Oliver, like the comedian and television host.

One might object that this is trivia, and only of interest to the kind of person who deeply wants to know the name of Shakespeare's landlord (John Hatton, probably). But the trivia is the point. On the Lay Subsidy Roll, Shakespeare is assessed at the same value as a court musician and a doctor. He is just below the men of the grand livery companies, the mercers and the grocers; he is richer than a plumber but poorer than a skinner. This gives us a snapshot of Shakespeare's life and a moment of wider economic change, in which the old structures are shifting. St Helen's parish was first constructed around a priory, but at the dissolution of the monasteries the church lands were seized by the crown, and the old priory hall passed into the possession of the Leathersellers' Company. This is, Marsh suggests, why Shakespeare might have decided to live there. His father was a glover, and he would have known men in these trades.

The profession of playwright didn't exist when Shakespeare was born. Seeing him this way, in a world of work and of workers, might help us to revise some of the sentimental stories we tell about the sweet swan of Avon. But this portrait of Shakespeare's London has a romance of its own. His neighbours were immigrants, who had fled the sacking of Antwerp and the St Bartholomew's Day massacre in Paris. In Elizabethan English, these were called 'strangers', and, like them, Shakespeare had been born elsewhere and came to London to make his fortune.

Living with Shakespeare is filled with riches, some of them tantalisingly undeveloped, many of them hidden away in the 100 pages of appendices at the end. In Appendix 9, Marsh explains the context around two names on the tax listing: Poley and Maunder. These were government agents, small-time players in the Elizabethan underworld of spies and counter-spies, involved in the arrest and possibly murder of Christopher Marlowe, who was Shakespeare's great predecessor and rival. A whole novel suggests itself here, or a terrible TV series: young Shakespeare among the spies and surgeons in a changing London. That is not the story Marsh is telling, but without his work — diligent, precise, oddly irresistible — we would not have it at all.

THE HEPWORTH PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION © BOWNESS, HEPWORTH ESTATE



Barbara Hepworth carving outside Chy-an-Keris, Carbis Bay, Cornwall, 1948

Chiselled beauty

Patrick Skene Catling

Barbara Hepworth: Art and Life
by Eleanor Clayton

Thames & Hudson, £25, pp. 288

'To see a world in a grain of sand', to attain the mystical perception that Blake advocated, requires a concentrated, fertile imagination. Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), one of the leading and most popular British sculptors of the 20th century, fervently imagined that her works expressed cosmic grandeur and her own spiritual aspirations. In the foreword to this thoughtful and enjoyable biography, Ali Smith testifies that Hepworth was 'fiercely intelligent', while its author, Eleanor Clayton, caandidly declares: 'I write as a curator who loves the artist she presents, a fan writing of her hero.' Her research shows how frequently the sculptures convey 'concepts [Hepworth] considered universal and eternal'.

Clayton, eminently qualified as an expert on all aspects of Hepworth's long and prolific career, is curator at the Hepworth Wakefield gallery, which will present a major retrospective from 21 May until 27 February. Wakefield, in Yorkshire's

West Riding, is where Hepworth was born, and Clayton has organised other exhibitions such as *Hepworth in Yorkshire* and *A Greater Freedom: Hepworth 1965-75*, co-founded the Hepworth Research Network with the universities of York and Huddersfield, and published widely on British modern art.

Hepworth had a comfortable, happy childhood and always cherished vivid memories of Yorkshire, explored with her father, a county surveyor and alderman, who encouraged her by enrolling her at Leeds school of art. She entered at 17, when Henry Moore, a Yorkshire coal miner's son, had already been there a year. Having served in the army for the last two years of the first world war, he was 22 when they met. They had 'a little affair', Moore said, but he later more tactfully described their relationship as that of a brother and younger sister.

It seems probable, though uncertain, that Moore aesthetically dominated their early conversations. Anyway, after further education at the Royal College of Art in London they went separately to work as sculptors. The first products of their hammers and chisels were notably similar, his 'Madonna and Child', her 'Mother and Child'. They both sculpted approximately biomorphic female figures, with small heads, elephant-

tine legs, and curves in between perforated by immediately recognisable large, circular holes.

Hepworth went on to exhibit with another fellow sculptor, Paul Skeaping, in London galleries. In 1928 they toured Tuscany together, married in Florence and, back in England, she gave birth to a son, named after his father. As the marriage was breaking down, she turned her attention to Ben Nicholson, the distinguished abstract painter. In 1939, when war was imminent, he took Barbara and Paul to St Ives in Cornwall, where Hepworth would live, as an increasingly important artist, for the rest of her life.

In 1934, expecting another baby, she was surprised, on 3 October, to deliver triplets — Simon, Rachel and Sarah. Nicholson, too, was surprised; they had £20 in the bank. Two months later he found his own career and demanded a trip to Paris. From then on, he was often an absentee husband, usually residing in London. She wrote frequent, eloquent letters to him, expressing her affection for her family and complaining that domestic chores were exhausting her. She loved her four children, but loved her art even more. For professional and financial reasons, she felt she needed to sculpt every day.

Politically liberal, a ban-the-bomb activist, she was naturally drawn to friendship with Dag Hammarskjöld, the director-general of the United Nations. Having met him in New York, she engaged in a correspondence in which he professed his love of art and world peace and she her love of world peace and art. She presented him with a sculpture for his office. After his death in a plane crash on a mission to negotiate peace in the Congo, she speculatively developed an abstract, 'Single Form', in plaster, for casting in bronze. The design was similar to some of her previous works only much bigger, about 20ft high, with a giant hole near the top. In the hole's rim she inscribed: 'To the glory of God and in memory of Dag Hammarskjöld.' The UN formally commissioned the work in 1942 and she ceremoniously installed it on the forecourt of its headquarters two years later.

There were tragedies. Hepworth's first son, Paul, an RAF pilot, also died in a plane crash. Hepworth herself suffered a long-drawn-out, painful illness and died in a fire in the apartment above her studio. In her will, she left the studio and garden as a museum to display her work. Administered by Tate St Ives, it attracts thousands of visitors every normal year.

The biography's many excellent illustrations, aligned with relevant passages of text, have helped Clayton put together a comprehensive account of Barbara Hepworth's talent and determination.

Barbara Hepworth: Art & Life
is at the *Hepworth Wakefield* from
21 May–27 February 2022.

Revolution and repression Suzi Feary

The Republic of False Truths

by Alaa Al Aswany,
translated by S.R. Fallowes
Faber, £16.99, pp. 464

Certain novels complicate the very notion of literary enjoyment. This, by the author of the international bestseller *The Yacoubian Building*, is such a one. Despite its gripping narrative, compelling structure and vivid characters, every time I picked it up it was with a sinking heart. In telling the story of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 through the viewpoint of a variety of Cairenes both for and against, Alaa Al Aswany holds out the slender straw of hope against the slashing shears of repression.

General Ahmad Alwany has just supervised the torture of a man and the abuse of his wife at his HQ. But it's not as though he's devoid of human sentiment; he adores his daughter, Danya, a medical student. Unfortunately for the general, Danya is impressed and influenced by a fellow student, Khaled, an implacable foe to the Mubarak regime. The narrative switches between various strands: Danya and Khaled's story; emails between Asmaa and Mazen, two shy lovers; the unstoppable rise to power of Nourhan, a TV presenter and mouthpiece of the regime; and the moral transformation of the wealthy, self-indulgent, hashish-smoking Ashraf Wissa.

Wissa cuts an ignominious figure at the start by penning a lusty manifesto on how to seduce female servants. Coming from a persecuted religious minority, the Christian Copts, Wissa has learnt to lie low in a Muslim theocracy. His snooty wife Magda having long since ceased to attract him, he is obsessed with the maid, Ikram, who shows every sign of reciprocating his affection. Wissa owns a building overlooking Tahrir Square, and once the young people begin to demonstrate there, he finds himself inexorably drawn into the protest.

If Wissa is a thoroughly attractive figure, Nourhan is a fascinating female villain, a paradoxically pious seductress who targets powerful men. It wouldn't be correct to call her a religious hypocrite: to her mind, the will of Allah and her own self-interest always coincide. Support for the regime is conflated with piety, and members of the ruling class repeat their contemptuous view of ordinary Egyptians as simple folk who only respond to strong leadership. Mubarak is toppled; but the youthful rioters quickly learn that the apparatus of state and army remains intact.

A twin offensive is launched: the pumping out of anti-reform propaganda on state TV, and the brutal suppression of dissent. In horrific scenes, army vehicles trundle over the helpless demonstrators. A young woman

cradles a friend whose brains have been extruded. A disbelieving father attempts to wake his dead son, who lies with a surprisingly small hole in the centre of his forehead. Captured female protesters suffer demeaning 'virginity tests'. Particularly grueling passages involve witness testimony, as victims repeatedly attempt to seek justice through a biased judiciary.

The novel ends with one small, sweet act of redress. But given the material, Al Aswany declines to offer us the full satisfaction of a happy ending. Retribution remains a purely literary concept.

More Miami vice Ian Birrell

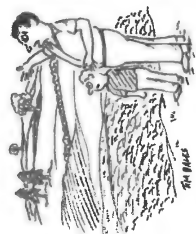
Dirty Gold: The Rise and Fall of an International Smuggling King

by Jay Weaver, Nicholas Nehamas,
Jim Wyss and Kyra Gurney
Hodder & Stoughton, £14.99, pp. 384

Deep in Peru's Amazon rainforest sits a desolate zone, stretching for miles and pocketed with chemical-tainted water that glistens orange and blue. This was the centre of the country's illegal gold-mining operations, where tens of thousands of desperate people dug into the soil in search of a precious mineral that could make the difference between destitution and wealth. For every ounce found in the crime-infested badlands, nine tonnes of toxic waste are thought to be left behind in an environmental catastrophe that will contaminate the region for decades.

No wonder Pope Francis, on a visit to the impoverished area, called gold 'a false god' when so much wreckage is left behind in its wake. Yet one tonne of this illegal metal left the nation each day, an informant told an amazed investigator almost a decade ago — the weight of a male walrus and worth about \$40 million. Much of it was used to wash drug money for local gangsters, laundered with forged papers from front companies to make it seem legitimate, and then shipped abroad, where it could be melted down for sale in respectable outlets across the world.

When the American investigator did his



...and in that direction, three festivals have been cancelled.

sums, he realised to his horror, if his source was correct, this meant that illicit gold worth \$15 billion a year was leaving Peru, yielding five times the profits of cocaine for cartels. Meanwhile, three Miami businessmen were cultivating a flamboyant local playboy — the father of ten children by five women — and suspected money launderer, who was hoovering up gold for sale in the States. He was nicknamed Peter Ferrari for his love of flashy sports cars. The trio, working for a respectable American firm, hastily did a deal with the Peruvian to buy all his gold. This was the start of an extraordinary rollercoaster ride that saw them hustle huge quantities of gold before their adventure ended in prison cells.

Dirty Gold, by an award-winning team of Miami Herald journalists, tells the tale of these 'three amigos' who smuggled more than \$3.6 billion of illegal gold into the US between 2013 and 2016 for one of the nation's largest gold-trading firms. Their leader was the London-born Samer Barrage who 'spoke with a posh British accent and owned homes in Nicaragua and Spain'. The others were a hard-living young graduate, who did much of the work on the ground, and a tragic family man in his forties, mocked as 'Fat Ronnie' by his comrades who, through misplaced loyalty, ended up with the longest sentence when their world crashed.

The first half of the book crackles along as the greedy trio — their banter on WhatsApp later obtained by investigators — build up their empire. Thanks to their deal with Ferrari, their company saw its purchases of Peruvian gold rise 15-fold in the first year alone. 'The bosses did not ask many questions — the gold was pouring in and that was all that mattered,' write the authors. An airport bust simply meant gold smuggled into neighbouring countries, such as Ecuador and Bolivia, which saw exports to the US instantly triple, despite no new mines opening. In Chile their contact was a former college student in his early twenties, claiming to be melting down coins, who became the country's biggest exporter of scrap gold overnight.

The rise of the amigos makes for a reasonably entertaining yarn — although the ease with which these goons build an empire based on smuggling and the lax practices of a reputable US firm is depressing. Unfortunately, much like the scam, the fun falters as the narrative shifts to their downfall. The pages become clogged with duller characters, while it is hard to get enthused by rivalries between US agencies despite the best efforts of the authors as they stretch out their plot and create snappy chapter titles such as 'Dude, This Is Insanity'. Yet they deserve credit for exposing the dark underbelly of the jewellery industry and giving us another glimpse into the real cost of the global obsession with gold.

The liver birds Paul Levy

Foie Gras: A Global History

by Norman Kolpas
Reaktion Books, £10.99, pp. 152

In his excellent, brief chronicle of foie gras, Norman Kolpas lists Kate Winslet, Ralph Fiennes, Thandie Newton, Ricky Gervais and the late Sir Roger Moore as among those who don't want you to eat it, as well as Fortnum & Mason and the state legislature of California, which declared its production and sale illegal in 2019. Why do they care about something so petty as the making and consumption of this buttery, savoury age-old delicacy? There is, of course, a hint of class warfare about advocating its prohibition, along with caviar and other treats of the well-off and indulgent. But the main opposition claim is that the production of the hyper-fatty livers of ducks and geese is physically cruel and therefore immoral.

The factual argument is just plain wrong, and so is the ethical judgment that depends on it. I have witnessed the 'force-feeding' of ducks, and it is not a case of animal abuse. What actually happens is that the nicely behaved ducks (imprinted à la Konrad Lorenz) form an orderly

queue to take their turn swallowing a flexible tube that in seconds whooshes pellets of maize or mash of cereal down their gullets. They appear to relish this, and are, in my experience, fussed about and petted affectionately by the farming women of the south-west of France who perform what is called the *gavage*.

The problem, says Norman Kolpas, is that our celebrities and anti-foie gras activists 'immediately and understandably tend to anthropomorphise the birds, imagining how it might feel for a human to have a feeding tube jammed down the throat'. This image of oral rape comes from an ignorance

I have witnessed the 'force-feeding' of ducks and it is not a case of animal abuse. In fact they seem to relish it

of bird physiology. The human oesophagus is a more rigid structure of muscle, cartilage and bone, and inserting a tube down it means getting past the epiglottis, which triggers the human gag reflex. These waterfowl species do not have a gag reflex.

The *gavage*, in fact, mimics the birds' natural pre-migratory behaviour: following the seasons they gorge themselves with food in preparation for their long flights. This had been remarked at least as early


as 400 BC, when, says Kolpas, 'well-fattened geese were deemed sufficiently worthy to be presented as a gift when Agesilaus, king of Sparta, visited Egypt'. The Greeks and Romans force-fed geese with figs rather than grain, a practice later adapted for rich pork liver, as recommended by Apicius. Foie gras found its way to southwestern France with the conquest of Gaul (121-51 BC), and then Jewish slaves, cooks and farmers spread it east across Europe. Though goose makes the most appreciated fat liver, the amount of goose foie gras now produced globally has become minuscule (about 5 per cent) compared with duck foie gras, mostly from (pond-shunning) hybrid male Moulard ducks, whose meat is also succulent and valued.

Why, then, do we still have anti-foie gras hysteria? It is true that force-fed ducks may find it more difficult to waddle around the farmyard in their last liver-expanded days; but though it's obvious that force-feeding causes an abnormal swelling of the liver, it's not evident that pain is being inflicted. In normal artisanal conditions, the birds are confined for the last days in barns or smaller units, both for convenience and efficiency, but avian social distancing is respected, if only for reasons of hygiene. The scare stories, and long-discredited photographs of geese with their feet nailed to the floor, are more mischief-making. The point of *gavage* is to get the birds to gain weight; mistreating them puts them off their food.

Most foie gras comes from France. Exports decreased recently because of bird flu. There seem to be some alternative production methods to *gavage*, for example, the farm in Extremadura that deceives the birds into stuffing themselves to prepare for migration. Waitrose has sold goose liver 'faux gras', and there is a product branded Foie Royale that involves a little chemical tinkering with the texture. A US foie gras farm in the Hudson Valley says its uncaged birds are treated so benignly that visitors are encouraged to take photographs. It's difficult to find figures, but it appears that even the Chinese have so far failed to industrialise foie gras production, and that it remains an artisan-produced food. In the nasty world of cheap, intensively farmed chickens and eggs, punishing foie gras producers looks like a truly trivial pursuit.

Kolpas could have been a little more discriminating by distinguishing the greater delicacies, cooked whole or uncooked fresh foie gras, from the much more common pâté de foie gras, which can consist of 50 per cent or less of the real thing. As for foie gras class war, we'll have to leave that to English speakers: foie gras was enshrined by the inheritors of the French Revolution as part of their *patrimoine culturel et gastronomique* in 2005, and remains a delicious aspect of France's democratic celebrations of Christmas and the New Year.

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The first Cambridge spy Jude Cook

A Fine Madness

by Alan Judd
Simon & Schuster, £14.99, pp. 256

For his 15th novel, the espionage writer Alan Judd turns his hand to the mystery of Christopher Marlowe's death. The result is never less than engrossing, with Judd putting the scanty known facts about the great playwright to ingenious use.

The story is narrated from the King's Bench prison by Thomas Philipps 30 years after Marlowe's fatal stabbing in a Deptford rooming-house brawl. Philipps is good company, a master cryptographer and key employee of the spy-master Francis Walsingham, yet a self-proclaimed 'simple man' who yearns to marry and settle down. These contradictions help make him as fascinating as the mercurial Marlowe, who he's sent to recruit at Cambridge. Philipps immediately senses that Marlowe needs 'protection from himself... Expounding heresies excited him'. Yet he's powerless to save him. A jejune loose cannon, Marlowe is already thrillingly amoral. A natural anarchist and atheist, with a zeal for disruption, he's also 'a cat that walked alone, always with something withheld'. A bad end feels inevitable.

From here, Judd leads us through Marlowe's shadow career as a spy, teasing out vivid scenes from the historical record. While *Tamburlaine* is already causing a stir in London, Marlowe is sent by Walsingham to smoke out two recusants at an inn near Oxford, with Philipps as his handler, using the bole of an oak tree as a dead drop — a roll nod to future espionage techniques. Later, Marlowe becomes a carrier pigeon for the state, delivering communiqués to Europe without knowing their contents. As Philipps dryly notes: 'Agents often never know the parts they play... Intelligencing is like war, in that anyone lacking sureness of aim pays a price.'

Luckily, Marlowe's aim is always true, at least until he becomes involved with Poley, Skeres and Frizer the men who will be present in the fateful rooming house in May 1593. All three are aligned to powerful men with different political agendas: Walsingham, the Earl of Essex and Robert Cecil, Lord Burghley's scheming hunchback son. When Cecil reveals to Philipps the secret plans for the succession of James I, with Marlowe involved in the line of communication, the murky machinations of the different factions ensure the playwright is assassinated.

Or is he? Judd's coup is to question whether they really were machinations at all, or just coincidences. Or even the fallout from a hidden homosexual relationship

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ALAMY



A cat that walked alone: portrait of a young man thought to be Christopher Marlowe

threatening, darkly, to ooze out at any moment. Ostensibly he's back to make an album (hence rock'n'roll) with his band Lord Urchin, but it also means a homecoming to Karine and their infant son, and hopes for a return to, or a development of, the heart-rendering first love they stumbled through in *Glorious Heresies*. A form of *Private* commentary addressed to Karine runs through the book, reflecting on the long arc of their entanglement — which McInerney slightly over-refers to as their 'history'.

The characters are self-consciously Irish, and go so far as to point it out to one another: 'Jesus, you're so fucking Irish', is the response to the suggestion that people can make their own minds up about Ryan's past. 'It was said that Ireland was reinventing herself,' the thwarted matriarch Maureen Phelan muses as she charges around the city in a vague rage: 'It was a funny time to be Irish. There weren't even generations between flips.'

The effect is of a novel archly, almost swaggeringly, self-aware, which teases wryly with offerings of Irish issue bingo: Maureen and her teenage granddaughter have a disagreement about the Magdalene Laundries — in the face of the adolescent one-word reaction 'sad', Maureen thinks, furiously, 'in her guts, she must empathise with the women on the telly [Magdalene survivors]. She could still taste that history as salt in sea air. She was too close to it to stop at sad'.

It was 2019 and a funny time to be Irish. At no time in history was it not a funny time to be Irish... What could you do except keep trying to tell the story of it? To be young and gifted and damp.

It's true that 'New Irish' writing has become a distinct sector of a literary market, controlled overwhelmingly from London, with authors such as Megan Nolan, Naoise Dolan, Eimear McBride and Sally Rooney being grouped together. To be New Irish is to address Ireland post-crash, and the results are often scathing, intelligent treatments of class. McInerney does not disappoint but, unlike her peers, she meets this taxonomising impulse head-on, and the result is a state-of-the-city, rather than nation, novel, sardonic, sexy, witty, lanky with a winsome smirk, which breaks into a long-stride run for the pure pleasure of it — and it is a pleasure to observe.

between Marlowe and Walsingham's cousin, the dedicatee of the posthumously published *Hero and Leander*. The ramifications are endless, the answers few. As Philipps comments: 'Most of us are like fishes in the lives of others, a silvery flank glimpsed once and never seen again.' Fortunately, Judd keeps us guessing until the last pages of this taut, clever, thought-provoking thriller.

An unholy trinity Stephanie Sy-Quia

The Rules of Revelation
by Lisa McInerney
John Murray, £14.99, pp. 352

Lisa McInerney likes the rule of three. Three novels set in Cork structured around sex, drugs and rock'n'roll and, within that, 'smoke, coke and yokes [ecstasy], St Paddy's modern trinity'. *The Rules of Revelation* follows her debut, *The Glorious Heresies* (winner of the 2016 Women's Prize; in its focus on the relationship between teenagers Ryan and Karine, it represents the sex component) and its sequel, *The Blood Miracles* (drugs, 2017). It reprises *Glorious Heresies'* movement between multiple characters, Ryan Cusack (centre of *Blood Miracles*) seen through them.

Ryan has returned to Cork, where bad blood waits for him, barely congealed and

'I'm not interested in moral purity'

Michael Harm talks to St Vincent about Sheena Easton, Stalin and performing in five-inch heels

St Vincent — Annie Clark, a 38-year-old singer-guitarist of prodigious gifts — sends a lot of time confounding people. She confounds them with stage shows that are less gig than theatre, ostentatiously choreographed and fabulously provocative (though not in any crude sense). She confounds them with an image that morphs from album to album (for her sixth, *Daddy's Home*, she has adopted the dissolute Cassavetes-heroine look). She confounds them by, in a puritan age, placing sex squarely within her work, though usually in a plausibly deniable way (the title *Daddy's Home* refers to her father's release in 2019 from prison after serving nine years for his part in a stock-manipulation scheme. She says of the title: 'It's perky'). She confounds them by being private and elusive, by refusing to be pinned down on her sexuality, whilst also entering into relationships with celebrity A-listers Cara Delevingne and Kriston Stewart.

And she confounds with her music, too, which shifts shape from record to record. One of the great pop and rock guitarists of her generation, she now rations her solos pretty strictly, but when they hit, they hit hard (on *Daddy's Home*, 'Live in the Dream' features the best David Gilmour solo ever played by someone other than David Gilmour).

The new album is, she says, modelled on the records of the early 1970s, but the most blatant musical reference on *Daddy's Home* isn't Pink Floyd or Steely Dan or any of the names Clark has been dropping in interviews. It is, confoundingly, Sheena Easton, whose first single, '9 to 5', supplies the melody for 'My Baby Wants a Baby', about a woman who is very much not the happy homemaker of the Easton song. Oooh, clever reversal. Except it's not. It was all an accident.

'I wrote the song, and for 12 to 24 hours I was walking around thinking: "My God, I've just written the best melody of all time." But then I started thinking: "But it's so familiar. God, it's like it always existed and then it just poured out of me." And I was like, oh wait... "My baby takes the morning train..." And I thought: "Oh, this actually works really well — it adds a layer

to the song that is very interesting." I have of course given Florrie Palmer, who wrote that song, her publishing due.'

The 1970s references aren't just for aesthetic reasons. Clark thinks we're having our own early 1970s moment, as a veneer of social co-operation is removed. 'We are in a time that feels very uncertain in a lot of different ways: economically, obviously; we are still in a pandemic; there is cultural uncertainty. And what happens, I think, in human nature is that we want something to hold on to, and if getting perpetuated and pushed to the top is this idea of moral certainty that social media can help legislate, then that's what people are going to cling to. I'm interested in ideas that can cause less human suffering, rather than more. Hopefully that's not a controversial take. But I'm not interested in moral purity. I don't know what that looks like: it seems like a lot of times when we're on the hunt for it, there end up being far more casualties. Who among us... — I end up sounding like Jesus — let that person cast the first stone.'

None of that sounds remotely controversial, of course, but the careful phrasing suggests that Clark knows a large number of her admirers are precisely the kinds of people who do see outrage in every deviation from acceptable thought. I suggest to her that we probably both see ourselves on the liberal left, and that it gets a little wearing to see our own side demand constant orthodoxy of thought, even if we agree with most of the orthodoxies.

Our conversation had begun with a discussion of Stalin — Clark has spent lockdown reading about Stalinist Russia, just because she realised she knew very little about it — and she returns to it in her answer, as if a parallel has just occurred to her (albeit without the millions of deaths, the dictatorship, the purges, the pogroms and all that stuff). 'I think life is incredibly complicated. People are really complicated. The structures of

power are really complicated. And we have to be able to talk about the complication and the nuance in order to actually have progress. I am absolutely 100 per cent there for progress. It seems to me: look what happened in Russia. When you demand allegiance to an orthodoxy, you create suspicion, bad faith, and people get ahead by pointing at other people and saying: "Burn that witch!" That doesn't end well. We just need to be thoughtful. We need to be able to listen. We need to be able to talk to ideas, and in the economy of ideas separate the good ones from the bad ones. We need to look at things with logic. We can't be slaves to the "likes" that the outrage will garner. But I'll say this and probably be cancelled for it.'

There's a curious theme that keeps cropping up with Clark: physical discomfort. I interviewed her for her last album, *Masochism*, and she noted that when she toured with David Byrne she didn't feel satisfied unless she ended each show bruised. I asked why, and she replied that she didn't know. In an interview to promote *Daddy's Home* she said she had deliberately worn clothing on her *Masochism* tour that caused her discomfort. Why? 'Probably just some conflation of pain and good work. If I can do all this, if I can juggle while my feet are on fire, doesn't that make the juggling all the more impressive?' She pauses. 'I don't know. I think I wanted to feel in my body, and I wanted there to be an obstacle to feeling in my body while I was performing.' She pauses again. 'I don't know. I'm not really entirely sure.'

Does the notion of discomfort appeal to her at some level? After all, one might say her performances cause discomfort to the audience, not least in — to return to a word she had used — their air of being 'perky'. Again she pauses, for a long time. 'I guess I can never presume to know how people feel or necessarily draw a straight line between what I am doing and how they are going to react. I think I kind of go a bit on instinct, whether things that I think are on that line of funny/surreal/uncomfortable... I don't know, manic, ecstatic... I feel like we're all exploring it together at the same time. I'm not sure. I wasn't conscious of wanting to be uncomfortable when I made myself go

IMAGE: ZACKERY MICHAEL; STYLING: ANGEL COLLINS; HAIR BY: PAMELA NEAL; MAKE UP: HINANO NISHIGUCHI



Annie Clark, aka St Vincent, adopting the dissolute Cassavetes-heroine look for her new album *Daddy's Home*

up in five-inch heels and do a show for an hour and a half. I just knew how I wanted it to look. I guess when I say 'it', I mean me. Which I guess is a really strangely dissociative way to look at it.

I'm not entirely convinced. Everything Clark does is so deliberate, so carefully considered, why wouldn't her approach to discomfort also be a conscious choice? It seems unlikely to be accidental. Her attraction to unease extends to her dealings with the press: at the start of the promotional cycle for *Masseduction*, she gave interviews in which questions she deemed boring were respond-

ed to with prerecorded messages; the other week she demanded an interview — a pretty innocuous one, in truth — be pulled for some unspecified reason, which prompted four-

I once sent a writer to meet her who came back quite disturbed by the experience

nalists in Facebook groups to come forward with their own stories of how uncomfortable she had made them feel when they sat down with her (I have interviewed her twice

and never felt discomfort, but as an editor, I did once send a writer to meet her who came back quite disturbed by the experience). I suspect — I don't know, and it's not a hill I wish to die on — that Clark's great subject is power itself. It just happens not to emerge in her songs as often as it does in other areas of her professional life.

But why should that be a surprise? It's exactly what you'd expect from someone as confounding as Annie Clark.

Daddy's Home is out now on Concord Records.

Classical music

The neglected, the niche, and the uncool
Richard Bratby

Strauss, Liszt, Rota: London Symphony Orchestra, Noseda
LSO St Luke's, via Marquee TV

The Beauty of the North: Maxwell Quartet

St Mary's Church, Ebbwston, via ryedalefestival.com, until 8 July

When this whole mess is over, there'll be a shortish MA thesis — or at least a blog post — to be had from analysing classical music's evolving response to the crisis. Already, looking back, distinct phases are emerging from the viral fog. Phase One: the Banana Bread Apocalypse — that first lockdown, when Jamie Oliver was telling us to smooch up frozen peas and pretend it was pesto, and phone-cam footage of a cellist playing Bach in the spare bedroom felt like a kind of miracle. Phase Two: orchestras working out what they could actually do while socially distanced and audienceless. Cue a spike in online performances of works for small (or spaced-out) orchestra. Lots of Tallis *Fantasia*s and *Stegfried Idylls*. A brief flurry of live shows with miniaturised ensembles and no lull breaks.

Phase Three was when hopes of a normal 2021-22 season spiralled down the plug-hole, and things started to get interesting.

It's a good time to roll out those unsaleable passion projects — for a little longer, anyway

Roughly speaking, the run-up to Christmas, when anyone (and it was by no means everyone) who had the cash and the technical resources to get online realised that since there wasn't a harpist's chance in hell of making any actual money, they might as well play what they liked. The CBSO staged an entire programme of Villa-Lobos's *Chôros*; the LPO mixed cocktails of Vivaldi, MacMillan and Spohr; and in the wake of BLM, conductors suddenly discovered the music of Florence Price and the (more affordable) Chevalier de Saint-Georges. Phase Four is roughly where we are now — expecting an imminent return to live concerts, but with restricted audiences and an unspoken hope that musical demand will temporarily continue to outstrip supply. It's a good time to roll out those unsaleable passion projects — for a little longer, anyway.

The LSO's latest online concert certainly has the appearance of a loss leader. Savour it, you lovers of the neglected, the niche and the irredeemably uncool: Gianandrea Noseda conducts Liszt's *Orpheus* and follows it

with the 1957-vintage Third Symphony by Nino Rota. It says something about fashions in 21st-century classical programming that the most familiar item on the programme is the Duet-Concertino by Richard Strauss, which is still, frankly, pretty unfamiliar due to the practical and financial difficulties of booking two soloists for a shortish piece. Here, it's performed by two LSO principals, the clarinetist Chris Richards and the bassoonist Rachel Gough, and it's hard to imagine any big-name woodwind stars playing it with more personality or warmth.

Noseda rings his orchestra around them, heightening the feeling of chamber music, while the two soloists act out an innocent love story. This is very late Strauss: music of twilit intimacy and gentleness, with occasional flashes of old man's mischief, and all lapped by washes of iridescent string tone. Gough and Richards play off each other with immense charm and wit — sometimes playful, often poignant, with Gough in particular creating sounds that range from plaintive middle-register sobs to ardent, sax-like song. Noseda's orchestra swoons and shimmers, while the harp glints through string tremolandi like sunlight catching a late frost.

It's lovely, and even amid the bare brick walls of LSO St Luke's, the orchestra sounds succulent. I don't know whether Noseda was ever under consideration to succeed Rattle as the LSO's music director, but you've got to love a maestro who's willing to champion Liszt's symphonic poems — once-popular works whose disappearance from the concert hall has been near-total. Noseda seems to have chosen *Orpheus* purely because he loves the sound it makes. 'It's very sweet, very tender,' he explains, before a performance whose glowing cantabile makes Liszt feel like the missing link between bel canto and *Parsifal*. And then comes that Nino Rota symphony, an exercise in supercharged sprezzatura in which Rota elegantly deploys the musical grammar of cinema — widescreen fanfares, cadences as punchlines — across four sunlit, neoclassical movements.

It's essentially a divertimento, and we'll miss those when normal business resumes. Still, chin up, and take a look at the Ryedale Festival, which has chosen to preface its online concerts with footage of green fields and crystal streams (some of it was filmed in the grounds of Castle Howard). In a performance by the Maxwell Quartet, filmed in Ffberston church, the opening chord of Haydn's quartet Op. 74 No. 1 comes like a sudden blast of moorland air. The Maxwell's notion is to set Haydn's folkier inspirations against 18th-century Scottish fiddle tunes, and they go at it with gumption, resin bling on string as they really dig into Haydn's hurdy-gurdy drones. Then it's over, and you realise just how much music really does gain from being in a real place, in real time — hearing the last notes echo off stone walls and walk-

ing out, head buzzing, into the chill air and blossom scent of a May night in the Vale of Pickering. The old normal? Bring it on.

Theatre
Shades of Fleabag
Lloyd Evans

Still Life
nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk, until 24 June

I Wish I Was a Mountain
Egg Theatre, via Vimeo

Good Girl
sohotheatreondemand.com

A new work by Alan Bennett features in *Still Life*, a medley of five 'untold stories' from Nottingham Playhouse. The dramas were filmed during lockdown. Before the Bennett premiere, there's a monologue by a withering granny complaining about the price of cereal in a deserted food bank. Then, a banality-cramped slice of jabber between two van drivers eating lunch on a flight of stairs. This is followed by a ten-minute soliloquy from a precocious schoolgirl whose insights include, 'my books are very heavy' and 'England is not part of Scotland'. A fourth cascade of tosh is parroted by a dim cab driver who trundles around the city bantering aimlessly with an eminently forgettable passenger. All these

Naughty to use Alan Bennett's name to draw the punters into a colossal waste of time and energy

characters seem to share a common mental affliction: they have nothing to say but they can't stop saying it.

Finally, the Alan Bennett show begins. Frances de La Tour stars as a widow, Muriel, who sits at home rehearsing the speech she intends to make at her husband's funeral. He may, or may not, have died of Covid. After two minutes, Muriel receives surprising news and stops speaking. And that's the end. A huge disappointment. And a bit naughty of Nottingham Playhouse to use Alan Bennett's name to draw the punters into a colossal waste of time and energy.

A young musician, Toby Thompson, has created an hour-long fairy tale for children called *I Wish I Was a Mountain*. It's a mixture of poetry, jazz piano and recorded music, and he uses an attractive, flexible set which he builds and dismantles during the show. His work is profound but accessible to youngsters and his theme is the agony of human desire. Our wishes spring from deficiencies but as soon as one wish is satisfied a new one replaces it. Is there a solution?

His tale centres on a violinist who has



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no ambitions at all and is perfectly content with his present condition. The violinist visits a magical fair where everyone is granted their heart's desire but, having no wishes, he simply plays his violin and merges with the melody. When the music finishes, he ceases to exist. An amazing idea. Most kids would love Thompson's warm, relaxed, buzzy presence on stage. A few might urge him to reach the point of the story a little more briskly.

There is a comic play from 2017 on Soho Theatre's website by a female performer in her thirties. Shades of *Fleabag*, perhaps. *Good Girl*, written and performed by Naomi Sheldon, is set in Sheffield where ten-year-old GG discusses sex with her schoolfriends. It's a subject about which they've heard plenty but know nothing. Their conversations are touchingly hilarious and tinged with weird but realistic details. The girls experience strange sensations when looking at pictures of Patrick Swayze. 'A sort of tingling, followed by a heaviness.' Aged 12, they strip naked and inspect each other's genitals, trying to work out 'how it fits in'. By 14, they've discovered orgasms. Or at least some of them have. 'Who here has had an orgasm?' asks Laura, the leader of the group. GG is mortified. 'I have a cough-

This is a wonderful portrait by a fantastic new voice. Clever, funny, fearless and indomitable

ing fit. I've inhaled a skip.' As soon as she masters the technique she tells her friends how fast she can reach climax. They counter with even more impressive accounts of their efficiency. The result is 'a vaginal arms race'.

GG loves physical contact with her girlfriends. 'I pull Zoe close and inhale her shampoo.' Her feelings for Laura become so powerful that she bites her arm during a hugging game. Is she becoming a lesbian or is it just a phase? Next day at school she receives a note from Laura terminating their friendship. 'You are so intense,' writes Laura. But, adds GG, 'there is a love heart over the "p".'

GG goes to university and visits a hair salon for the first time. But she realises that she doesn't know how to instruct the stylist. 'Just do what you'd do if you had my face,' she says. The show is crammed with little gems like this. But it's not just some cute girly diary. GG has a streak of wildness and violence in her. She attacks boys physically at school and she fantasises about fighting a group of builders who oggle her on a bus. She lives according to the motto coined by Gert Halliwell (Ginger Spice): 'I don't know what I'm doing but I'm going to damn well do it.' In her twenties, she replies to an advert seeking 'girls for a masked ball'. She receives £200 to have sex with a stranger at a party. Her feelings are a blend of horror and

joy'. The horror is triggered by her realisation that she likes being paid for sex. This is a wonderful portrait by a fantastic new voice. Clever, funny, fearless and indomitable. That name again: Naomi Sheldon.

Pop livestream Off-the-peg ire Graeme Thomson

Van Morrison
Real World Studios

Over the decades, Van Morrison's role within the tower of song has shifted from chief visionary officer to head of complaints. It's not a promotion. The title track of his new album, *Latest Record Project, Volume 1*, is a rebuke to those who insist on living in an artist's past rather than his present. A laudable sentiment, perhaps, but one less easy to put into practice when Morrison's present consists of 28 tracks which hone an already ornery world view to a paranoid peak. When he isn't griping about his divorce he's peddling half-baked conspiracy theories, sneering at internet users and 'media junk', and bitching about modern music, crooked politicians and false prophets.

Musically, Morrison's anti-lockdown, mask-burning meltdown could have been rather fun. Instead, his new album is too long and a bit lazy, his ire wrapped in rote, off-the-peg blues, soul and R&B shapes, while his tendency to portray himself as an honest teller of the earth — raking the topsoil, never digging too deep — in a world of crooks founders in banality. 'Only A Song' is a dispiriting deconstruction of the mysterious act of creation. Once Morrison traded in transcendence. Now he simply shows us his working.

So much for the album. On with the show. Covid be damned, Van has been champing at the bit to get back on stage since the first lockdown, and to a certain extent you could tell. The online concert, filmed at Peter Gabriel's Real World complex, found him in lively form. This is an artist who has been leaving awkward pauses between songs for 50 years. The lack of a crowd was hardly going to throw him off his stride.

On a plainly dressed stage and backed by an unfussily accomplished band — rumpled and gezzierish to a man, with the exception of backing singer Dana Massey — Morrison pulled focus in a pin-stripe suit, fedora, natty silk neckerchief and coach driver's shades, accessorising his sax with a gold microphone. Resembling a cross between a rogue Blues Brother and a dandy Womble, he controlled proceedings in the manner of an old school bandleader, the kind who keeps musicians in line with cryptic hand signals and swift karate chops.

On 'Have I Told You Lately' — awkwardly retooled from a lush ballad into perky jump-blues — he handed out solos to his band like homework. When the music gripped him he closed his eyes and jerked his arm up and down, as though battling with a particularly stubborn Louvre blind.

The set leaned heavily on *Latest Record Project, Volume 1*, which was a shame. The songs rolled by, a bluebeat shuffle here, a soul waltz-lime ballad there. There was a glut of biting garage-band blues. Pretty much everything could have been written in the pre-Beatles era. Now and then a new original emerged from the blanket of blandness to tickle our feet. 'Up Country Down' was fun, Van honking on sax as banjo rippled around him. 'Blue Funk', which resembles his 1970s steamroller 'I've Been Working', was fine and fiery.

Within these comfortable songs, the surly sermonising poked out like busted bed springs. 'Need a real live audience to perform!' he shouted during the chugging 'Where Have All The Rebels Gone?'. 'No gigs, no choice, no voice,' went 'Deadbeat Saturday Night'. 'Why do you care what's trending?' he barked on the already notorious 'Why Are You On Facebook?'. My heart went out to Dana Masters, six feet

Morrison's anti-lockdown, mask-burning meltdown could have been fun; instead he founders in banality

behind him and parroting this nonsense. As the set unfolded, by no means unpleasantly, I tried to think of another artist of comparable stature who insists on playing so few of his greatest songs. Never mind crowd pleasers such as 'Brown Eyed Girl', 'Moondance' and 'Gloria', none of which Morrison performed here. He also routinely ignores beauties such as 'Madame George', 'In The Garden', 'Listen To The Lion', 'A Sense Of Wonder' and dozens more works of real genius.

Why he chooses to do so is something of a mystery. It's certainly not because he can no longer cut it. At 75, Morrison's voice remains not just remarkably strong and true, but also dextrous, playful, fluid. When he did delve briefly into past glories, the gulf between what he settles on being and what he could still be was actually rather heartbreaking. 'Saint Dominic's Preview' was tender and elegiac, buffered by acoustic guitar and warm horns. 'Cleaning Windows' was fresh and funky, and when he sang, 'I'm a working man in my prime,' for a moment it felt like it could almost be true. Rumours of Morrison's demise are much exaggerated, but right now his gift deserves greater focus than he seems willing to give it. The man himself would no doubt counter with the old blues adage: don't look back.



Top tip: 'Botte d'asperges', 1880, by Édouard Manet

Painting Bring me my spear Daisy Dunn

Manet's 'Botte d'asperges' are probably the most famous asparagus in the world. The artist painted the delicious white- and lilac-tinted spears for the collector Charles Ephrussi in 1880 before invoicing him for 800 francs. Ephrussi was so delighted with them that he paid Manet 1,000 instead, to which Manet responded by sending a second picture. 'One appears to have escaped your bunch,' the painter quipped in his accompanying note. The new canvas featured a single asparagus.

Manet was in the last decade of his life when he began sending small paintings of fruit and flowers to his friends. While Ephrussi received asparagus, the muse MARY

Laurent got apples, and artist Berthe Morisot violets, like those Manet had included in his portrait of her in mourning. Each picture offered something lasting. I would have given you the real thing, Manet seems to say, but they'd only have rotted away.

There is nothing quite like asparagus. By the time you have your first bunch simmer-

Artists find its soft, paintbrush tips and green and purple stegosaurus-like stalks utterly irresistible

ing in the pan you can be sure that it's spring and that nothing, not even rain, can stop you from enjoying it. For artists too, asparagus have proved utterly irresistible, the soft, paintbrush tips and stalks like stegosaurus with their green-and-purple spikes lending interest to dozens of paintings besides Manet's.

For the dark background of his 'Botte

d'asperges', the Frenchman drew inspiration from the artists of the Dutch Golden Age, who were just as enamoured of the vegetable as he was. The little-known Middelburg artist Adriaen Coorte (active 1683–1707) perhaps gloried in asparagus above any other. Typically working on paper mounted on panels measuring just 20–30cm, Coorte produced a number of exquisite still lifes, most of which lay forgotten until the 20th century.

While his contemporaries celebrated profusion, painting extravagant spreads of food too abundant to eat, Coorte favoured what was small and unpretentious. He found beauty in a handful of common medlars, in gooseberries from the market, in wild strawberries still trailing the vine. But most of all, he found profundity in asparagus.

Coorte painted it repeatedly, sometimes with strawberries, sometimes with redcurrants or cherries — he was by no means

restricted by seasonal availability — to set off the greens. His beautifully lit study of asparagus with a butterfly glows on the salmon-pink wall of Kunsthau Zürich. In the Rijksmuseum, Coorte's asparagus are alone, huge, and cigar-like (see p31). Look closely and you might even say they were bombs in a futurist painting. One spear droops pitifully over the edge of the table. The whole bunch, in fact, looks perilously close to rolling to the floor. Coorte almost always pushed his composition to the very corner of the table or ledge, as if to symbolise the uncertainty of life.

In ancient Rome, and especially at Pompeii, asparagus was seen to be paradigmatic of the fertility of the countryside. Many wealthy homeowners had it depicted in their wall frescoes and mosaics. Asparagus grew so abundantly in the wild, as it still does in parts of Italy and Greece, that Pliny could complain of the wantonness of cultivating giant specimens. 'The gluttony!' he exclaimed, on hearing of asparagus weighing three pounds.

Asparagus may be found dripping in shrimp butter or hollandaise in some of the nicest restaurants today, but historically, it has often been celebrated as a humble vegetable. On the table between Christ and the

On the table between Christ and the two disciples, we find not bread but a large plate of glowing white asparagus

two disciples in Giovanni Battista Piazzetta's 'Supper at Emmaus' (1720), where we would usually see bread, we find a large plate of glowing white asparagus. The succulent spears, by no means intended to denote luxury, come as quite a surprise to those of us used to seeing them on menus for £20.

Artists have just occasionally explored asparagus's phallic potential. Max Ernst's sculpture 'Les Asperges de la Lune', designed in 1935, plays on the fact that the French for asparagus — seen as an aphrodisiac for centuries — can also mean penis. Ernst's giant erect asparagus may equally evoke the truly bizarre way in which real asparagus grow. Visit a farm and you'll find hundreds of individual spears poking their heads through the soil like members of a miniature Tibetan army.

Even when cooked, asparagus are, it must be said, decidedly odd-looking. In shape and tone they challenge the palette in much the same way as they do the palate. It is perhaps not surprising that Proust took such an interest in them. Inspired, some believe, by his friend Charles Ephrussi, Proust had Elstir, the artist, produce a painting like Manet's in *À la recherche du temps perdu* and offer to sell it to the Duc de Guermantes. 'Trois cents francs, une botte d'asperges,' exclaims the Duke. You can bet it was worth every centime.

Television Under the radar James Delingpole

The Pursuit of Love
BBC1

Jupiter's Legacy
Netflix

I'd been expecting the BBC to make a dreadful hash of *The Pursuit of Love*, especially when I read that they'd spiced it up with hints of lesbianism and punk rock. But actually, I think what writer/director Emily Mortimer has done here is play a very clever trick — the equivalent of releasing a cloud of aluminium chaff from your fighter aircraft to distract the enemy's missiles.

So while everyone is cooing about how refreshing it is that lesbianism has finally got a look-in (see also: every other drama and comedy series on TV from *Killing Eve* to *Call My Agent*), Mortimer can get on with the deeply subversive business of slipping under the BBC radar an honest, old-fashioned, faithful and fantastically enjoyable Nancy Mitford adaptation.

Yes, I agree with those complainants who say that Lily James's diction can be a bit slurry and unintelligible; but she does look and feel right for the part of undereducated, upper-class, romantic dreamer Linda Radlett (even in the scenes where she's supposed to be 17 when in real life she's 32); and she makes a fine, touching and convincing double act with Emily Beecham as her BF Fanny Logan, especially when they're sharing a bath.

That bath scene, by the way, was the 'lesbianism'. Everyone is so ignorant and common these days that your average viewer (and indeed critic) has simply no idea what standard inter-war upper-class behaviour looks like, and so colours it with their own fatuous misconceptions. To me, though, this adaptation definitely passes the sniff test — even if the hunting scene wasn't quite echt, what with it having been filmed obviously out of season with all the trees in summer leaf.

The make-or-break character, for me, is Uncle Matthew — the one who keeps on his wall the entrenching tool he used to kill eight Germans in the Great War, who thinks education is completely wasted on women, and who hunts children on horseback as if they were foxes. A less intelligent adaptation might have portrayed him unsympathetically. But here, Dominic West is able to play him absolutely dead straight: a character, yes; a nutcase, probably; but certainly not someone of whom one is expected to disapprove.

The frustrating thing about Netflix's new hit series *Jupiter's Legacy* is that just as it starts to get really exciting, it judders

to a halt, with a cliffhanger that won't be resolved for 18 months as we wait for Season Two, which I'm sure will be better than the first.

Not that Season One isn't hugely enjoyable. But it does comprise quite a bit of place-setting. This is going to be a truly epic superhero saga, with a huge cast of complex characters participating in a broad sweep of history from the Wall Street Crash to the near-future. So reasonably enough, we need to get to know them first — their foibles and rivalries, how they got their superpowers, the moral schemata that underpins the whole show.

If you think superheroes are just for kids, you might be surprised by how dark and deep this show is prepared to go. At its heart is the question: if you had superpowers sufficiently great for you to be able to change the course of history would it be right for you to do so?

Devoutly Christian chief protagonist Sheldon (Josh Duhamel) is adamant that it wouldn't. That's why he binds his fellow superheroes to a code that forbids them from killing anyone or meddling in politics. But the others, such as his brother Walter (Ben Daniels) and his son Brandon (Andrew Horton), aren't quite so convinced.

*Mortimer's honest, old-fashioned
Nancy Mitford adaptation
is deeply subversive*

especially when they start losing buddies to increasingly psychopathic supervillains but aren't allowed to retaliate in kind. These tensions come to a head in the season's shocking climax.

For some the show is too earnest. It's certainly missing the sheer joyful irresponsibility you find in such Millar creations as *Kingsman* and *Kick-Ass*. But both the latter were screenwritten (Jane Goldman) and directed (Matthew Vaughn) by English people who are totally comfortable with concepts such as irony, feyness, and self-deprecation, whereas *Jupiter's Legacy* feels much more sincere, butch and American.

That said, we get lots more of the books' most interesting character — Sheldon's gorgeous dropout daughter Chloe (the superb Elena Kampouris), who has zero interest in following in Dad's footsteps and so squanders all her talents on drugs and casual sex with unsuitable men, which she finances by being a supermodel with the supergift of looking totally great even after overdosing on a giant bag of mysterious blue crystals.

This is the kind of detail that makes Millar so endlessly watchable. I don't think there's a writer in the world who creates such a plethora of fantastically inventive material: I just wish he could get more of it on the screen sooner, preferably with Goldman screenwriting it and Vaughn directing it.

Far from heaven: shy Barbara, who embarks on a flirtation with a cheesy golf-cart salesman



Film Utopia or Pleasantville? Deborah Ross

Some Kind of Heaven

Available online on Amazon Video, Curzon Home Cinema and iTunes

Some Kind of Heaven is a documentary set in The Villages, Florida, which is often described as a 'Disneyland for retirees' — it, too, has its own faux-historical town centre — and is the fastest-growing metropolitan area in America. (Current pop: 130,000.) The vibe is, I would say, cruise ship, but with golf. Hell, in other words, unless, that is, I'm going to be left to rot in a nursing home, in which case: I can learn golf!

This is a film by Lance Oppenheim, who lived in The Villages for several months. It is a fascinatingly weird place and the film is worth seeing if only to get a sense of that. It is self-contained, with its own (uniform) houses plus banks and cinemas and restaurants and churches, and there are more than 3,000 clubs you can join. You could, for instance, become a member of the synchronised-golf cart team (I saw this with my own eyes). But is it the utopia it seems? Or is it a kind of Pleasantville?

Oppenheim doesn't come at any of this head-on. Instead, it's explored through the

lives of four residents. There is Barbara, a shy widow whose Yorkshire terrier is not similarly shy (he brazenly humps the cat at her feet). There is Anne and Reggie, who have been married for 47 years, and now Reggie seems to be suffering from a mental collapse. He dresses in sheets, chants, believes he's been reincarnated, takes mind-altering drugs and has boundary issues. 'I'm going to jack off, so don't come in here,' he tells Anne. And also there's Dennis, an 81-year-old gigolo — his business card reads: 'celebrity handyman and companion for hire' — who isn't a resident. He sleeps in his camper van in the carpark.

There are more than 3,000 clubs. You could, for instance, become a member of the synchronised-golf cart team

and prowls the site by day in the hopes of meeting a woman 'who has money but isn't embarrassing to be seen with'. Ffs, Dennis. One of the take-home messages is, I suppose, that while The Villages is sold as a magical paradise where all your problems will melt away... they don't.

Oppenheim is only 24, whereas the average age of a villager is 71, which could have been an issue, but he seems genuinely empathetic and curious rather than critical or condescending. It's up to us to judge whether we'd wish to live in a place that is neither intergenerational nor diverse (I didn't spot a

single non-white face and there are so many white-haired men with white moustaches it's impossible to tell them apart). There is the occasional existential wail. At one point we join a 'self-development seminar' where a woman says: 'I used to be beautiful but now I'm nothing,' which hurts. And there's the loneliness, which can't be avoided, even when there is golf (50 courses!) and nightly dances in the faux-historical town square. Barbara embarks on a flirtation with a cheesy golf-cart salesman because, you suspect, that's better than being alone. Reggie's behaviour isn't just distressing Anne, it has also isolated her. You will be moved by all their stories, even Dennis's. When a man has always used women, what happens to him when he runs out of women to use? Actually, no. You will be moved by all the stories apart from Dennis's, I should have said.

With its 83-minute running time, the film is necessarily superficial — a snapshot rather than a deep dive. Many questions go unanswered. Who is making money from this? What happens to residents when they can no longer look after themselves? Are there (busy) cemeteries? Can you get sex if you want it? (According to what I read later, there's a 'Lover's Lane' where you can run-die up in your golf cart for a smooch.) Plus there's no mention of the politics, or the fact that Trump retweeted a video of a resident shouting: 'White power!' Perhaps I will just rot in a nursing home after all.

Hares

By The Revd Steve Morris

The numbers of the dear old mountain hare in England are becoming perilously depleted. A researcher, Carlos Bedson, has suggested there may be only 2,500 left in the Peak District. Warmer weather seems to be finishing them off. It is time to appreciate them and their cousins, the brown hare, more and to look after them.

I was in my thirties when I'd head up on Saddleworth Moor with my father-in-law to watch the white-furred mountain hares. We didn't say much, we just took in the old magic of those beautiful creatures.

I'm not the only one to love hares. That great English poet and hymnodist William Cowper suffered from severe depression and many breakdowns. It was adopting three leverets as pets that began to turn the mental tide. Puss, Bess and Tiney worked their way into the troubled poet's heart. Puss would sit on his lap, nibble his hair and allow himself to be carried. He'd also drum on Cowper's knee with his paws if he wanted to go and play in the garden.

The hare has a rare and ancient pedigree. You can trace back the Irish hare to at least 30,000 years ago. But the British mountain hare tops that. Bones between 114,000 and 130,000 years old have been found.

It is no accident that the hare has played such a part in our national consciousness.



Force of nature: Dürer's 'Young Hare' (1502)

Their bulging eyes, skittishness and beauty seem otherworldly. They don't have burrows to hide in, so they rely on sheer speed and the ability to perform instantaneous hairpin turns. That jumpiness and alertness is comical and also just a bit sinister.

Hares have a strong history in art. They are in early Christian art icons and frescoes, but no one is quite sure why. The print of Albrecht Dürer's micro-observed 'Young Hare' (1502) has found its way on to the walls of many German households over the centuries.

It was Colts with their love of nature who provided the most touching story about the creatures. St Melangell is the unofficial patron saint of hares. She came to Powys

from Ireland in the 7th century and became a hermit to escape an arranged marriage. One day the Prince of Powys called Bychtwel was hunting hares with his dogs. One poor hare took refuge under Melangell's skirts and so impressed was Bychtwel with the hermit's piety that he gave her land, which she used to set up a community of women.

It is hard to put the witchy appeal of the hare into the right words, but the poet John Clare managed it. Clare was an extraordinary character, one of the few genuinely canonical working-class poets and a contemporary. He also, like Cowper, suffered terribly with his mental health and he spent his last 23 years in an asylum. I wonder if the hare's strangeness, lunar madness and association with lunacy is what has helped troubled souls feel such an affinity with them.

When Clare wrote 'Hares at Play' at the end of the 19th century, there were four million brown hares in Britain. Clare sees 'the timid hares' throwing their daylight fears away. 'Out they sturt again and round the hill.' They are 'like happy thoughts [that] dance and play'.

Happy thoughts indeed. It took two troubled geniuses at war with their own thoughts to remind us of a beautiful, odd and magical creature that we ought to treasure a good deal more.

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Travel & General

TRAVEL



While many are still holding off, we continue to take bookings for the Summer holidays, and especially for those destinations predicted to be on the green list.

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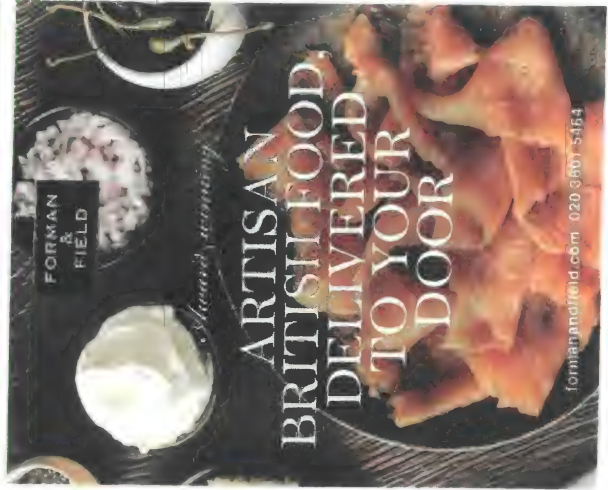
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Perhaps there are enchanted
restaurants gardens in London,
but I have never found one
— Tanya Gold, p62

LIFE

High life Taki



New York
Orthodox Easter Sunday came late in May this year, and I spent it at an old friend's Fifth Avenue home chatting with his young relatives. During a great lunch, I thought of those calendar pages one sees in old black and white flicks turning furiously to represent the passing years.

It was the three generations present that brought on these reflections. My host George Livanos and I have been friends since 1957, and he and his wife Lita have five children and 15 grandchildren. Not all of them were present, but there were enough youngsters to remind one of the ballroom scene in *The Leopard*, when Prince Salina watches the younger generation with pride but also with sadness at having grown old. Old age for me is like being on death row without having to spend time in the cells. Mind you, I kept such profundities to myself in view of the youth surrounding me. The young don't think about the man in the white suit, except perhaps where rock stars are concerned.

Back in the good old days, rock stars enjoyed the mortality of mayflies, but like everyone else they now live to a very ripe old age. Unless you have spent your life immured in a Tibetan monastery, you must know that the wrinkly Rolling Stone Mick Jagger has reached the grand old age of 112. It is an insult to rock, let alone to those stars who died young, to have lived this long. All living Beatles and Rolling Stones are included in the list of shame. And what about my fellow Pug Bob Geldof? Most are fooled by his looks — ravaged, tortured, cursing — but Bob is a very happily married fellow, aged 107. To think Mozart failed to reach 36, Chopin 40, F. Scott Fitzgerald 45, Papa Hemingway 62; it's unbelievable that Paul McCartney has made it to 121.

Some say it's the water, others the diet, but whatever their secret, it's still as disgraceful as hell. Rock stars should die young and have a good-looking corpse, as they used

to say in long ago Manhattan melodramas. Freddie Mercury showed the way, as did Jim Morrison, Elvis, Janis Joplin, Amy Winehouse, that poor Buddy Holly, dead at 22, and the Big Bopper. I could go on. The Pugs Club commodore, Roger Taylor of Queen, was the youngest drummer boy in a battle that took place on 18 June 1815 outside Brussels, and he's still merrily cruising in his newly acquired 400ft sailing boat.

But enough about the man in white, who, I must admit, has been on my mind more than once of late. During the Easter lunch, one of the youngsters mentioned that he had just driven by Montecito, where Prince Halfwit and his 72-year-old bride (the woman who mistook the Mall for Rodeo Drive) reside. Echoing Gertrude Stein, he said there was no there there. I believe him. Montecito is what is known as a drive-by place, with no soul or beauty in it. But why worry about crappy places like Montecito? It's full of old folk with plenty of moolah but no brains.

Hollywood is down the road a bit, where once upon a time stars exited early on. The greatest screen lover of the time, Rudolph Valentino, died aged 31, while the blonde bombshell Jean Harlow left us at 26. The great Gary Cooper, whose quiet manner and dignified behaviour hid the fact that no female got past him, never made it to 61. My choice for number one, and a very elder statesman among thespians, William Holden, was barely 63 when he died alone and drunk in his house. James Dean was in his twenties when he crashed his Porsche, and the divine Errol Flynn, as terrific an athlete as he was a seducer didn't reach 51. The man who first made movies great, Irving Thalberg, hubby of Norma Shearer, met the man in white at 37, while the King, Clark Gable, died at 59 from a massive heart attack after the exertions of roping a horse in the film *The Misfits*. I could go on.

Mind you, I'm not one to talk. I am complaining about rock stars living to a ripe old age, and forgetting that the greatest Greek writer since Homer should have cashed his chips in long ago. So I will come clean. I was born in 490 BC, so when the battle of Thermopylae began in 480 I was ten years old and already schooled to fight dirty and to the end. But my Spartan mother, a friend of King Leonidas, begged him to leave me behind. I had volunteered to be a messenger but the King ruled against it. To be a Spartan after the gallant 300 had died to a man was a great shame. I felt as though I were a coward and

took up drink and chasing women. I exorcised some of the survivor guilt by fighting against the Athenians for ten years, but it was never enough. Bob Geldof, who was judged too old to fight during the Irish uprising of 1916, never lets me forget it. I say to hell with him and the rest of you youngsters.

Low life Jeremy Clarke



Sally (la Sal, the Salister) is part whippet, part Labrador and part dourmouse. She is 16 years old, stone deaf, three-quarters blind and has dementia. She sleeps like the dead all day but loves her evening walk. We've decided that for as long as she enjoys her walks and remains continent indoors we'll delay taking her to the vet and asking him to put her light out.

'We're talking about you,' I shout at her after we've had a review because the dementia has become more obvious. No response. Deaf as a post. 'You're on borrowed time, sweetheart,' I say, lifting her ear to speak into her head. No response. Strange it must be for a dog to live in silence. At one time she used to jump out of her skin and hide under the table every time I sneezed.

The sense of smell remains, though she must sniff more energetically than before for nuance. When out for the evening walk she likes above all else to check the dog messaging boards along the route. It's her one remaining interest. The message board might be an unremarkable patch of long grass or a wall end but apparently there is as much information to be gleaned from one of these canine pissoirs as there is from a Sunday newspaper after a stunning by-election result. She trots from one of these places to the next fanatically inhaling the myriad urine signatures. If we deviate from the usual route she sulks for hours.

Pre-dementia, she maintained a proper perspective on the sensational stuff she was getting from these rank spots. It was the message, not the medium that was of prima-

ry importance. She bore in mind that however fascinating a tale told by the commixture of urines, the bigger picture was that she was out for a walk. And the even larger picture was that the longer she kept him waiting around the next corner for her to catch up, the more likely the foolish old man with the lead tied around his waist was to threaten her with violence. A one-minute pause at each message board was the tacit agreement. Time enough for her to read the small print and footnotes, and roughly the length of time before my mental self-sufficiency expired. After that we would both move on with interest and self-esteem intact.

The Salster's creeping dementia has caused her to rip up that agreement. Now the medium is the message. Once she's in that piquant, ammoniac zone the world is not enough and there's no dragging her out of it. When I retrace my steps to remind her about this flaming walk we're supposed to be on, it's no longer a case of: 'Sorry about that. I was quite carried away, you know. Very interesting new poster. I can assure you it won't happen again.' Now it's: 'Bugger off. I've found happiness and I'm not going anywhere.'

Walking on and hoping she'll come to her senses and run to catch up? Tried that. When she comes out of her trance, she's

As much information can be gleaned from one of these canine pissoirs as from a Sunday newspaper

forgotten who she is and where she is and which way is up and I have to go searching for her down in the village. Or she'll take up with the next person or persons to come along the path, presuming they are me, and get lost that way.

But she's a harmless old thing and before dementia's miserable twilight set in, La Sal had the sunniest, most engaging smile of any dog I've known. She hated to be touched and never sought affection but allowed children to stroke her ever so lightly. Before she lived here in the Midi, home was the second floor of an apartment in Glasgow. I've read somewhere that Glasgow has the second thickest cloud cover in the world. Sally has never quite cottoned on to the fact that down here we have a sun, and that this sun's heat in high summer is unbearable for every living creature except perhaps the soldier ant. Unaware that she's moved from Scotland to the south of France, she will lie out in 40 degrees on terrace tiling too hot for a bare foot without noticing the difference in climate.

Now we've reached the stage where she's lost her short-term memory and forgets she's had her tea and asks for another. If you give her another tin out of compassion because she's not long for this world, she'll forget that she's had that one too. And often she'll stand motionless and stare at the wall for a

very long time as if she knows she's reached an ending. The other evening I sat on the floor and stared with her at the same spot on the wall. And after a while she turned and looked at me so sadly. Dear Sal.

Real life Melissa Kite



An angry text exchange between me and a former Tory councillor after she lost her seat has got me thinking.

During the campaign, I asked this lady if she would like to put a poster in my front garden as it adjoins the village green. Even more to the point, next door to me is her main rival, who has a placard fixed to his front wall.

Her reply came back no thanks. She did not want me to put up a poster or placard as it would only make matters worse by reminding the opposition to vote. In terms of the effect on her main opponent, she said it would 'wind him up'.

This seemed odd to me. Aren't the different candidates supposed to wind each other up during election campaigns? I asked around my various Tory friends and no one in this area of Surrey could find a poster to give to me. I had people ask, not revealing it was for me, in case the Tories didn't want the funny woman with the column to be their poster girl, but no, they couldn't get one either. There didn't appear to be any.

Driving along the A3 one afternoon, I finally spotted a Conservative poster. It was hidden behind the hoarding signposting an exit: a small blue square, barely bigger than four feet across, positioned right behind the massive road sign, so you could catch only the merest glimpse of it as you took the slip road, and even then you couldn't really look at it because you were concentrating on taking your exit.

A week before election day, the Tory councillor texted me again out of the blue (pun intended, because if she'd been more into the blue we wouldn't have been arguing). 'It was the right call not to do posters,' she said that in her opinion the ones that her main rival had put up around the villages looked like estate agent boards.

This was hardly the point. Pink and white and quite jolly, they looked attractive and were very effectively advertising this new grouping of local people standing for their villages.

I didn't reply, but I did write to the local

Conservative association making known my feelings about being told I couldn't advertise my political allegiance. Surely, if you discourage your supporters from publicly saying they support you during a campaign, you are hampering democracy?

They didn't reply. I felt a bit deflated, to be honest. When the day came to vote, I didn't vote. My blood pressure was up and I had a pounding headache. I lay in bed and couldn't rouse myself to go out and put an X in a box for a woman who had told me, effectively, where to stick my support. Fighting everything and everyone is wearing me out, I thought. If they want me to give up, I'll give up.

When the results came in, she had lost her seat to the man next door to me by 479 votes. And she wasn't the only Tory to lose. While all across Britain, and other parts of Surrey, the Conservatives were holding on to seats and gaining them, in my area they lost seats.

They went into the election here with seven county councillors but came out with three.

I confess I felt cross. So I belatedly replied to her last text: 'Congrats. Your strategy worked! If central government would only take a leaf out of your book we would

Fighting everything and everyone is wearing me out. If they want me to give up, I'll give up

have a Labour government. I not only didn't put up a Tory poster on your advice, I didn't vote either.'

She replied that she didn't need the sarcasm, and kind words of support were what I should be sending. 'One poster from you would have made zero difference.' Ouch.

She said she had lost because of the 'backlash on the local plan'.

Ah yes, the local plan, formulated on the Tories' watch: to put thousands of homes on the former Wisley airfield, until recently farmland, now in the ownership of Taylor Wimpey which is excavating it in readiness for building a new town. Leaflets come through my door every other week telling me how this is progressing.

And then there is the toxic row over a nearby waste burning site owed by a widely revered chap I like to call Demolition Man. The site is rumoured to be on the verge of being shut down, with many believing more houses will go there, after years of complaints from local people, to no avail previously.

The councillors who lost their seats, no matter how dedicated, must, on some level, be sighing with relief. Rough times ahead.

'I've done that for four years and I don't have to do it any more,' as the outgoing Tory councillor texted me, before informing me she was blocking me.

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SPECTATOR
CLUB

The turf

Robin Oakley



Combining through race recordings to try to find some fun horses for *Spectator* readers this summer, I have been struck by how often even the best riders find themselves stuck in equine traffic with plenty of horsepower underneath them but nowhere to go. Gaps open in a flash and then close again, forcing riders to snatch up and probe, often too late, for another opening. It is never, though, as simple as it looks from the stands. One former top jockey was berated by a trainer on his return to the unsaddling enclosure: 'Why didn't you go for that gap between the leaders two furlongs out?' 'Because, Guv'nor, the gap was moving a lot faster than my horse was.' Selecting potential equine investments is getting harder: in the autumn I picked horses who'd shown potential on good going. We then had three months of moonson. This spring I've been watching small fields competing while trainers have been keeping their best back in the yard and praying for rain. Climate change is no help at all.

It will nonetheless be an intriguing Flat season: the Derby and Oaks are the most open contests for years. No fewer than five top riders could fight out the jockeys' championship: holder Oisín Murphy, William Buick, Ben Curtis and the engaged housemates Hollie Doyle and Tom Marquand. It would be handy to tune in to their break-fast conversations — if they ever had time for breakfast. Among the trainers, two of the most likeable men in racing, William Haggas and Andrew Balding, look to have formidable teams. Former top riders Darryl Holland and Kieren Fallon are combining to run a yard together and Sean Woods is back training in Newmarket after a profitable 16 years in Hong Kong. An interviewer asked him: 'Your horses collected prize money of £25 million over there, didn't they?' 'No,' said Woods. 'It was £46 million.'

For our Twelve to Follow I start with Ralph Beckett's four-year-old filly Albatrossa whose electric burst at Ascot on Saturday was the most impressive performance I've seen this season. Father and son Simon and Ed Crisford are hoping for big things from Ilza'Eem but I will trust their progressive Aaaddey with the nomination. James Tate's bonny grey Top Rank, due out at Newbury this Saturday, should win some good prizes and goes in too. Clive Cox aimed two at Ascot's Victoria Cup last Saturday but only ran River Nymph, who won. The other, Dance

Fever, second to Tsar in July and golded in October, looks an equal prospect and joins our Twelve. Owen Burrows's Asadjuimc-rah stumbled at the start over five furlongs

at Nottingham but should win sprint handicaps. So should Andrew Balding's King's Lynn, runner-up to the speedy El Astronante at Chester. Another sprinter to watch is Ed Walker's Came From the Dark who met the no exit sign under Hollie Doyle when full of running last time out. We must have an Irish contestant so in goes Joseph O'Brien's filly Thundering Nights. I am including two middle-distance prospects from the yard John Gosden now shares with son Thady — Derrah, a colt by Sea The Stars out of Enable's dam Concentric, and the four-year-old Waldkoning whose three-year-old career was blighted by tooth abscess problems. William Haggas will surely win races with the likes of Al Aasy, Sea Empress and Tom Collins but we may get a better price on his Lockerie, so far tried only on the all-weather, so in she goes. Henry Candy's Run To Freedom improved steadily last season and must be included. (I note in passing that he says Kingston Star has plenty of speed. From him that counts.) David O'Meara is a handicap master and I include, too, his consistent milor Sheir. Finally, it has been a rough year for the Queen but with a bit of luck Tactical, who won at Ascot for Her Majesty last year, can repeat the feat this July after his victory over Naval Crown at Newmarket's Craven meeting.

And how did our Twelve do over the jumps this winter? Between them they competed in 45 races. Six of them won — Minella Indo, Imperial Aura, Kitty's Light, Jetaway Joey, Soldier on Parade and Valleres, and as well as their seven victories we had eight seconds and seven third places. Minella Indo was the star, taking the Cheltenham Gold Cup at 9-1. An honourable mention, too, for Secret Reprieve from the previous winter's Twelve who won the Welsh Grand National. He missed the cut for the Aintree version by one and had he run would surely have figured in the finish. The maths, though, was not good enough: to a £10 level win stake we ended with a loss of £73. But had Kitty's Light at 9-1 not been balked by the then disqualified Enrlo in the Bet365 Gold Cup, handing the race to the uninvolved Potterman, there would have been a small profit of £27. I hate bad losers who moan 'We wuz robbed' but we wuz.



'Shall I put the kettle on?'

Bridge

Susanna Gross

I'm not surprised so many scientific studies have shown that bridge staves off dementia: the game provides a constant workout for the memory. It usually takes people years before they can recall how many cards have been played in each suit — and not just how many, but which ones. Honours are easier to keep track of, but the smaller spot cards can be devilishly hard to remember, unless you have a photographic memory. Failing to notice even the most insignificant-looking card can prove costly later on. Playing in a recent Andrew Robson Club duplicate, England international Nevena Senior showed how just vital it is to keep your eyes sharp (she was West):

Dealer East NS vulnerable

♠ 10 9 6 5 2
♥ 7 4 2
♦ 5 3
♣ Q 10 9

N
E
W
S

♠ K Q J 7
♥ A Q 6
♦ 8
♣ A J 7 4 3

♠ A 8 4
♥ 8
♦ A Q 10 9 6 2
♣ K 8 2

♠ 3
♥ K J 10 9 5 3
♦ K J 7 4
♣ 6 5

West North East South
Dble 1♦ 2♥
3NT Pass 3♦ Pass

North led the ♥4 to South's ♥K and Nevena's ♥A. Nevena played a club to dummy's ♠K, and one back to her ♠J. North won with the ♣Q and continued with the ♥7 — presumably to show her partner she had a doubleton remaining. Little did she realise she couldn't afford such a 'high' heart — at least, not with Nevena at the helm. Nevena won with the ♥Q, and cashed two more clubs and her four top spades. On the fourth spade, South was squeezed: rather than bare her ♦K she discarded all her hearts. Nevena now cashed her winning ♥6 — South following ruefully with the ♥2 — for a well-deserved pairs top.

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After the debacle of my crash landing at The Griffin the other week, Mrs Ray has been keeping a frustratingly close eye on me and I've been forced to take it easy. It turns out that I'm on some sort of probation and spend much of my time on the naughty step alongside No. 2 son, banished thither for too much cocktail-making and too little A-level swotting.

We keep our spirits up by discussing what we're going to do once his wretched exams and this ghastly lockdown are both over. Next week can't come soon enough for either of us and we have big plans. Big plans. It's brilliant timing, then, for this peach of an offer from our chums at Mr Wheeler. We've offered the wines of Domaine de la Jasse before and readers greedily hoovered them up. Never before have we offered them so opportunely, though — mouth-fillingly tasty and modestly priced, they are all absolutely perfect for longed-for summer gatherings with much-missed mates.

The Domaine is a 30-minute drive from Montpellier in the depths of the Languedoc, the go-to region for lovers of wine with character that don't cost a bomb. Bruno Le Breton is head honcho and although he eschews his local appellation's regulations — thus allowing him to grow and make what he wants, how he wants — he runs the estate according to strict organic principles.

The 2020 Blanc de Blancs de la Jasse (1) is a real crowd-pleaser, being a neatly judged blend of unoaked Viognier and Chardonnay. It's fresh, lively and fruity, with zesty citrus and creamy peach and it finishes faultlessly dry. It certainly makes a very genial aperitif. £9.95 down from £12.95.

The 2019 Barrique Blanc de la Jasse (2) comes from vineyards in Limoux (which you'll know for its sparkling Blanquette de Limoux) and is made from barrel-aged Chardonnay. It has weight but it has freshness too along with hints of nuts, honey and toast. Compared with equivalent quality white burgundy, it's a steal. £10.95 down from £13.95.

The 2020 Rosé Cœur de Cuvée de la Jasse (3) is disarmingly appealing and resolutely Provençal in both colour and style. Produced from the very gentle first pressing of handpicked Grenache and Syrah, it's light, delicate, fresh, spicy and full of ripe summer berry fruit. £9.95 down from £12.95.

The 2018 Vieilles Vignes Rouge de

la Jasse (4) is an old vine (35 years plus) Cabernet/Merlot blend that's astounding value at less than £11 a pop. With cassis notes, cedarwood, liquorice, spice and rich, ripe plums and cherries it's both concentrated and complex and endlessly satisfying. £10.95 down from £13.95.

*Five fabulous
lockdown-wine
from the Languedoc*

Finally, the 2018 'Black Label' Tête de Cuvée Rouge de la Jasse (5), made from 100 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon. Handpicked from the choicest vineyard plots and aged in large oak barriques for 12 months, it's full of dark cherry, luscious blackcurrant, herbs and warming spice. It's delightfully rewarding and, if decanted and allowed to show off a

bit, really would pass for something far pricier and grander. £12.95 down from £15.95.

These are lovely, extremely fairly priced wines, ideal for the picnics and barbecues of summer and spot on for those of us gagging for the end of lockdown and the chance to invite everyone we can possibly think of to join us in drinking heartily and hugging our — and everyone else's — socks off.

In the unlikely event that you need a nudge, Mr W's chairman Johnny Wheeler proves that he's a complete pushover by generously offering a magnum of 2018 'Black Label' worth £32.95 to anyone buying any three cases and an even more handsome jeroaboam of the same (worth £69) to anyone buying any five cases. Go on, buy big and drink deep!

The mixed dozen has two bottles each of wines 1-3 and three bottles each of wines 4 and 5. Delivery, as ever, is free.

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		List price	Club price	No.
White	1	2020 Blanc de Blancs de la Jasse, 13%	£155.40	£119.40
	2	2019 Barrique Blanc de la Jasse, 13%	£167.40	£131.40
Rosé	3	2020 Rosé Cœur de Cuvée de la Jasse, 13%	£155.40	£119.40
	4	2018 Vieilles Vignes Rouge de la Jasse, 14%	£167.40	£131.40
Red	5	2018 'Black Label' Tête de Cuvée Rouge de la Jasse, 14%	£194.40	£155.40
	6	Sample case (2 each of wines 1-3, 3 each of 4 & 5)	£169.40	£133.40

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Promo code **SPECMAG**

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Total

Prices include VAT and delivery on the British mainland. Payment should be made either by cheque with the order, payable to Mr Wheeler, or by debit or credit card, details of which may be telephoned. Delivery will be from the week of 31 May. This offer, which is subject to availability, closes on 26 June 2021.

Start date

Issue no.

Signature

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Terms and conditions: This week's Wine Offer is managed by Mr Wheeler. The full details are in the 'T&Cs' email. Information@mrwheelerwine.com

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Chess

What's it worth?

Luke McShane

The rule of thumb for weighing up piece exchanges says that pawns are worth one, knights and bishops three, rooks five and queens nine. It is such a useful guideline that one can go a long way without ever questioning it, but strong players have a feeling for the limitations.

The first diagram shows a critical moment from the final of the New in Chess Classic, the latest online event in the Meltwater Champions Chess Tour, which was won by Magnus Carlsen. He didn't hesitate to sacrifice rook for knight and pawn, because the resulting position looks so cosy for Black. The knights on f6 and h5 are secure and ready to jump into e4 and g3. White's pawn on f5 is an impediment to his own pieces, so the bishop and rooks are bystanders, while the pawn on c3 is permanently weak.

Carlsen's judgment has been honed by his peerless knowledge of historical examples. Tigran Petrosian, the world champion most famed for his positional exchange sacrifices (rook for bishop or knight) played a comparable idea against Vlastimil Hort in 1970, shown in the second diagram. By playing 21...g6, Petrosian invited the knight check on f6, and after the exchange of pieces White's attack ground to a halt. Black's pawns and knights formed a cohesive unit, and the White pieces were reduced to aimless shuffling. In the final position, the advanced pawn on d3 could not be prevented from queening.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Carlsen's first tournament victory in the Champions' Chess Tour came just days after his world championship challenger was decided in Yekaterinburg.

Hikaru Nakamura-Magnus Carlsen

New in Chess Classic, May 2021

24...Rxe5! 25 dxe5 Qxe5 26 Qc3 Qc3 27 Qe1 Qd6 28 Qf2 Re8 29 Rcd1 Kf8. An important subtlety: 32...Ng4 would be premature, as after 33 Bxe4 Nxe4 34 Rxd5 Nxd2 35 Rxc5 Rxe5 36 KxT2 Rxf5+ 37 Kg2 White has every chance of drawing the rook endgame. 33 Rd3 Nf6 34 Qe1 Qf6 35 Rxd5 Qxh4 36 Bxe4 Qh1+ 37 Kf2 Nxe4+ 38 Qe2 Qxg2+ 39 Kd3 Black has a choice of winning moves, perhaps the simplest being 39...b5 to prepare c5-c4+ and Qg2h2+. White resigns.

PUZZLE NO. 653

White to play. Jones-Dominguez, New in Chess Classic, April 2021. Gavain Jones was hoping that his rook and pawn would cordon off Black's king indefinitely. But here, at move 125, a surprising opportunity arose. What move should White have played? Email answers to chess@spectator.co.uk by Monday 17 May. There is a prize of £20 for the first correct answer out of a hat. Please include a postal address.

Last week's solution: 1 Rh8! Kf6 2 g8-N mate

Last week's winner: John Brown, Rolleston on Dove, Staffordshire

58

Competition

Now we are rich

Lucy Vickery

In Competition No. 3198, you were invited to supply an extract from a children's book that is designed to explain economics to youngsters.

The seed for this challenge was former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis's *Talking to My Daughter: A Brief History of Capitalism* in which he uses the device of answering questions put by his young daughter to explain economics in a clear and engaging way. While his references ranged from *The Matrix* and *Blade Runner* to Sophocles and Frankenstein, you harnessed, among others, Dr Seuss, Lewis Carroll, Hilaire Belloc (who also wrote a primer on economics, *Economics for Helen*) and Eric Carle. Here's Moray McGowan: 'On Saturday, the Caterpillar stripped the assets from a farm, two department stores, three mines, four retirement homes in Victorian mansions, five pension funds, and six gents outfitters on prime sites. That night he went to bed with a very full portfolio...'

The winners earn £30.

'I say,' called Julian to the kindly-looking farmer's wife, 'we're camping nearby, and wondered if we could buy some provisions?'

'Perhaps some eggs, and ham, and fresh apples?' added Dick.

'I'm starving!' said George.

'Woot,' agreed Timmy.

'Of course, my dears,' trilled the jolly farmer's wife. 'You can have all that, and I can offer you a fresh pork pie, plus a lovely sponge cake made just this afternoon.'

'That's frightfully kind of you,' said Julian, earnestly. He took out two shillings. 'However, I really must insist that we pay you.'

'Oh my dears!' laughed the farmer's wife, wiping her eyes. 'This will cost you at least three sovereigns!'

'How much?' exploded George. 'That's daylight robbery!'

'Well, you did say you were starving, my dear. And I don't see another farm around here. When supply is limited, and demand is immediate, you get price inflation. This is a market economy.'

Paul Harris

Matilda baked such splendid pies

That epicures would rhapsodise:

The sauce was rich, the price was fair

And people queued around the square

To buy a pie and then to scoff it,

So Matilda made a profit.

But then she spurned, despite disapproval,

The supply/demand equation,

Brought her meat from somewhere nasty,

Slapped a pence on every pastry;

Vablen principles deserted,

Her demand curve turned inverted,

And her punters disembarked

For Mr Gregg, across the park,

Who, economically astute,

Made tasty pies, and loads of loot.

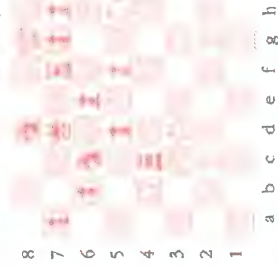
Nick Syrett

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Diag 1: Black to play, position after 24 Qc3-e1



Diag 2: Black to play, position after 21 Nf4-h5



Vlastimil Hort-Tigran Petrosian

Kapfenberg 1970

21...g6! 22 Nf6+ Bxf6 23 exf6 Nf7 24 Qd2 Bxd4 25 Rd3 Rh4 26 Rh3 Rg4 27 Kf1 Nd6 28 Re1 Kf7 29 Bc3 Ne4 30 Qd3 Ne5 Black need not rush to capture the pawn on f6. Later it will be captured under more favourable circumstances. 31 Qd1 Rg4 32 Bb2 b5 33 Qe2 Qd6 34 Kg1 Ne4 35 Rd3 Qc5 36 Rcl e5 37 Qe3 d4 38 Qe2 Nxf6 39 Rdd1 Nd5 40 Qd2 e4 41 Qg5 Nc7 42 Rd2 Ne6 43 Qh4 e5 44 Rcl Bxc2 45 Rxc2 Qxc2 46 Rcl Qxb2 47 Bxc6 d3 48 Rcd4 White resigns.



Crossword

2506:

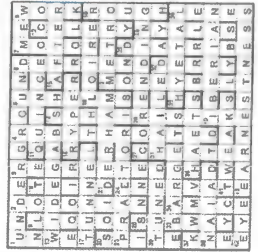
Summer's voice

by *Pabulum*

Ten unclued lights (including four pairs) are of a kind. Ignore two hyphens and an apostrophe. What could have induced this puzzle will appear diagonally in the completed grid and must be shaded.

Across

- 1 Eminent composer gives great cellist inspiration (7)
 - 9 Sin doesn't start somewhere in church (4)
 - 12 Piece of lead turned grey (5)
 - 13 Stop kid meeting adult (4)
 - 14 Deficient nosegay wounded Joan (6)
 - 16 Men in river fish (5)
 - 17 It's going west robbed of sun by coloured tree (5)
 - 21 Swank acquires hill where planes are displayed (7)
 - 22 Roving actor Matt retired I see (7)
 - 25 Sporting XI adore openers (7)
 - 27 Legendary poet's abridged alternative passage (5)
 - 30 Dad done wrong and forfeited chapel (7)
 - 34 Guardsmen binning an awful blotter (7)
 - 37 Behold 'Yankee returning with a woman (7)
 - 40 Trees from Oz housing larks' nests initially (5)
 - 41 Lush capsize with singular groves (5)
 - 42 Toltec stunning line dancing and eightsores (6)
 - 43 Surrealist tree (4)
 - 44 Tenor drove through tunnel (5)
 - 46 Tree with two branches pruned (4)
 - 47 I and you and us (3)
 - 49 Arabian woodcutter gives girl cake (7, two words)
- #### Down
- 2 Keenest rook's enthusiasm (5)
 - 3 Rector in endless discussion about old overcoat (6)
 - 4 Love a shabby house made of wood (5)
 - 5 Rice dish mostly eaten up in state (7)
 - 6 Bank one leaps over (7)
 - 7 Rude but competed with cold house (6)
 - 8 Seedy wag shuffling crabwise (8)
 - 10 Snapper soup Twist prepared (6)
 - 15 Jack at fault here and there (5)
 - 19 Most valuable skirt Tom shortened (7)
 - 23 Scholar after bed for sacred lotus (5)
 - 28 Philosophical saint over in Cuba (5)
 - 29 Dye a gossip mentioned aloud (7)
 - 31 Good news from guy in Moray? (7)
 - 32 Actress Deborah reared first-rate plants (6)
 - 33 Middle of gum inflamed amounts to gingivitis (6)
 - 35 Inn barred naughty Ukrainian monkey (6)
 - 36 Sextet of metro's train platforms (6)



SOLUTION TO 2503: APPLRY

The traditional county towns were Chester (misprinted as CHESTER: 27), Durham (DURHAM: 21), Derby (DERBY: 32), Lewes (LEWES: 36), Reading (READING: 28) and York (WORK: 8). The correct letters could give SUBWAY (26), examples of which are UNDERGROUND (1A), TUNNEL (17) and METRO (22A). Title: 'Appleby' misprinted.

First prize Julie Sanders, Bishops Waltham, Hants
Runners-up Mark Rowatree, London SE10;
Alan Roberts, Portlaoine, New Zealand

I had a little nest-egg
Nothing would it hatch
Until I tried a Ponzi
And none asked 'Where's the catch?'

The King of Spain's daughter
Was paid at 8 per cent
Her Infantas and her Grandees
Thought I was heaven-sent

My nest-egg grew larger
When others heard their tales
Although the egg was empty
It fooled the Prince of Wales

I skipped to the Caymans
And to Tuvalu
Where Interpol and taxmen
Can't catch you!
Bill Greenwell

'Dedication' said Eeyore gloomily.

'Oh, do cheer up,' said Piglet. 'I say, haven't your letters come on since your "A"?'
Eeyore had spelt out QUANTITATIVE EATING in sticks on the grass.

'It means eating too much,' explained Owl.

Everyone looked at Pooh.

'Easing!' said Piglet, jumping up and down.

'Oh,' said Pooh.

'Christopher Robin explained it to me,' said Piglet. 'It's a party game. Everyone sits in a circle and one person takes everyone else's pocket money. Then the others have to guess what happens next.'

'What does happen next?' said Pooh.

'It's a secret,' said Piglet. 'But everyone gets a prize of some more pocket money to buy things with.'

'What sort of things?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Piglet. 'Just things. Balloons.'

'Balloons?' said Eeyore. 'You know what the trouble is with balloons?'

Everyone looked at Eeyore.

'Inflation.'

Dan Cornaghan

Economy's fun
said the Cat in the Hat.
When you want something new
That's Demand; I see that,
then make it. Supply it
and you pay me for
that thing that you wanted
and so I make more.

If stocks then run low
(that's what Scarcity is)
they're rarer, so prices
go up with a whizz.
You pay more but get it
and I make more money
to do what I like with.
Economy's funny.
D.A. Prince

NO. 3201: COMMERCIAL GAIN

News that Salman Rushdie once wrote an Anchor butter commercial prompts me to invite you to submit advertising copy for the product of your choice in the style of a well-known author. Please email entries of up to 16 lines/150 words to lucy@spectator.co.uk by midday on 24 May.

No sacred cows I've paid the price for the supplementary voting system Toby Young



Some 114,201 ballots were rejected in the first round of the London mayoral election, approximately 5 per cent of the total votes cast. This wasn't because people were deliberately spoiling their ballots to protest about the fact that no one standing represented their views. After all, there were 20 candidates in the election encompassing a broad spectrum of opinion. No, it was because they didn't understand the supplementary vote system, whereby you're supposed to put a cross next to the candidate of your first choice and a cross next to your second. According to official figures, 87,214 of the spoilt ballots were discounted because people had voted for more than one candidate in the first preference column.

The way the system's supposed to work is that if no candidate gets over 50 per cent on first preferences, all but the top two are eliminated and second choices on the losers' ballots are then redistributed. But 327,980 of people's second preferences weren't counted, in most cases because they'd filled in the ballot paper incorrectly.

The rationale for this hard-to-understand system is that all the voters have an opportunity to affect the final run-off between the two candidates who receive the most votes in the first round, thereby minimising the tally of wasted votes. But the

number of second preferences that were transferred to Sadiq Khan and Shaun Bailey were 192,313 and 84,550 respectively, which isn't many, considering 624,585 people voted for other candidates in the first round. In fact, more people's second preferences weren't counted because they'd misunderstood the voting system than were allocated to Khan and Bailey.

At present, the supplementary vote system is used in all of England's mayoral elections, as well as the elections for police and crime commissioners, but the government intends to replace it with first past the post, parliamentary time allowing. This should help the chances of the Tory candidate in London's next mayoral election in three years' time, because voters for the candidates that usually come third and fourth — the Green and the Lib Dem — are more likely to put the Labour candidate as their second choice. But it's unlikely to make much difference, because in every London mayoral election dating back to 2000 the candidate who polled the most first preference votes has won.

No, the best reason for scrapping the supplementary vote system is because it's so poorly understood — and because the electorate rejected a transferable vote system in the 2011 referendum. Using one method in local elections and another in national elections is a recipe for confusion. When we were members of the EU, we were obliged to use some form of proportional representation when electing members to the European parliament, but now we have an opportunity to re-establish first past the post across the board. Of course, the government in Westminster has

devolved decisions on the system used for local elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but it can simplify things a bit.

I have a personal grudge against the system because I bet £25 that Niko Omilana, one of the independent candidates in London, would poll more than 50,000 votes. I'd never heard of him before, but my teenage children assured me he's a huge star on YouTube, as well as being very funny. In the event, he got 49,628, just 372 votes short. I wonder how many of the 87,214 ballots that ended up being rejected because people had chosen more than one candidate in the first round included votes for Omilana?

Quite a few, I imagine, given that his supporters, being young and unserious, were among the least likely to understand how the supplementary vote system works. I got bloody good odds, too. Sadiq did a bit worse than he did in 2016, and Shaun Bailey a little better than Zac Goldsmith, so I daresay he won't risk running for a third term. He's 50 and I don't suppose being mayor of London is the summit of his ambitions. He'll want to get back into parliament and make a run at the leadership in time for Keir Starmer's inevitable defection. That means that whoever the Labour candidate is in 2024 won't benefit from an incumbency effect. Combine that with a first past the post voting system and the Tories may actually have a chance of winning in 2024. My choice of candidate would be Kemi Badenoch, the former *Spectator* staffer who is now Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Equalities. Put her up against Stella Creasy or Wes Streeting and I'd wager more than £25 on her.

MICHAEL HEATH

*The Battle
For Britain*

IT WAS MY HUSBAND'S GENIUS
WITH DIY THAT HELPED US GET
OUT OF THE COUNTRY FOR OUR
FIRST HOLIDAY IN TWO YEARS



Spectator Sport

Foreign clash of the English titans

Roger Alton

Thank heavens the Champions League final is being played in Portugal, now Turkey's off the menu (sorry). It will certainly be a damn sight easier to get to than Wembley: have you tried to go round the North Circular these days? And at least the capital will not have to accommodate what is ominously described as 'the Uefa family', all 2,000 of them. Pity no one told them about family planning. And where would you prefer to go out for a post-match bite: Porto or Wembley Way?

Anyway, then we will see quite how far Chelsea have got inside Manchester City's head, with two very efficient victories in the League and the FA Cup in the past month. And the pressure on City with all that stuff about this being the owner's dream will be seriously intense come the final. What a mouthwatering prospect -- and what a contrast in styles.

Tuchel knows how to set up a team for a one-off match; Guardiola knows how to set up a team to win long-term, season after season. This Chelsea has the feel of Brian Clough's great



Q. I've recently been approached by a very good friend who -- with genuinely admirable candour and tact -- pointed out that my fiancée 'eats with her mouth open', and that I ought to mention it to her to prevent future embarrassment. I suppose I have occasionally noticed this habit in the context of pizzas and wine on the sofa, but now that my friend has addressed it I can't help but see -- and indeed hear -- his concern daily. Mary, how can I approach this rather unifying conversation about

a very unifying habit with my otherwise cultured thirty-something fiancée, without causing embarrassment?

— Name and address withheld

A. If your fiancée does not notice these things, she will not have noticed whether you yourself eat with your mouth open or shut. Share with her that your friend has done you a great favour by telling you that you eat with your mouth open. Ask her to begin monitoring you and telling you off each time you offend. This will give you the chance to tell her off too without her feeling victimised.

Q. I am soon to leave my village. A friend, unbidden, has organised a farewell lunch, to which invitations have been sent. I know the host will have felt obliged to invite a person with

whom, following a disagreement (about which the host may not know), I can't share a meal. I neither wish to alert the host to the spat nor for the person I've fallen out with to think I'm extending an olive branch by proxy. Mary, is it permissible to decline the lunch offer or to enquire about who has accepted?

— Name and address withheld

A. It is never a good idea before any event to ask who will be there. It is a tad impertinent. But more importantly, if you ask and then genuinely can't get to the event for some dramatic reason (including illness), it is assumed that you abandoned it because the guest list was not to your liking. If you genuinely fear this specific person's presence, it is best to forgo the event altogether. You should explain to your

Nottingham Forest side: powerful in defence and skilful, fast and exquisite to watch on the break. Attacking possession football against counter-attacking possession football. Fans of either side should be feeling anxious as well as excited.

But two English clubs making it all the way might say something about the Premier League, although they are foreign-owned, foreign-managed and largely staffed by extremely talented and highly paid foreigners.

Though not entirely. Both have a sprinkling of very good English players, which should be a cause of optimism for the coming European Championship. Mount, Foden and Grealish might sound like a strange instruction to party but could be England's midfield for the Euros. What a dazzling combination -- probably not defensive enough for Southgate, who might prefer Henderson and Rice in the midfield, but it shows the riches available to the English manager. And that's before we get to Kane, Sterling and Rashford up front.

How richly deserved that Warren Gatland picked Exeter's unfeasibly accomplished backrow forward Sam Simmonds for the Lions. He has been mesmerising throughout this Premiership season -- the best No. 8 in England for some time -- and should be playing for his country. But will Eddie Jones pick him, given

Eddie's sizeable ego problem? If he does select him next time around instead of Billy Vunipola, it will look as if he's saying: 'You were right, Warren, and I was wrong.' Which isn't Eddie's style, sadly. And that's what may cost England the World Cup next time, and probably did last time.

I would like to have seen Oums' youthful Marcus Smith on the plane to South Africa too, but he will doubtless get his chance later. For anyone who wants to know what playing for the Lions represents, watch Kyle Sinckler's harrowing interview about being omitted: 'I've got so much anger inside me. In a year or two maybe I'll look back and it'll all make sense, but right now it doesn't.' My feeling is that the Sinck will get to South Africa eventually. It is after all a rough old place to be a prop forward. But how refreshing to hear leading sports figures speak frankly about what their sport means to them, and a welcome gear shift from Stuart Broad's oddily petulant interview last year after being rested for one Test match, with five more coming up in short order.

Is do-it-yourself TV the way forward for sports hard done by on mainstream channels? All 18 first-class cricket counties are live-streaming home matches through their websites and it's proving a massive hit with lovers of the county game. Other sports should take note.

putative host that although you are immensely moved by his/her proposed celebration, you feel too emotional about your impending departure and would rather not attend an event commemorating a decision you still feel anxious about having made.

Q. May I pass on a tip to readers? A former neighbour with whom I share a birthday and exchange presents has moved. To my chagrin, a present from her arrived in the post. My solution? As soon as I opened her parcel, I went online and ordered her something. Then I was able to honestly say: 'Thanks for your present. Annoyingly I've just been online and seen that yours won't arrive until tomorrow.'

— J.L., London SW8

A. Thank you for sharing this tip.

Food

Fork in the road

Tanya Gold



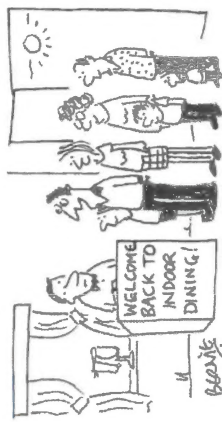
You cannot have cars and dining tables in the same dream-escape: it doesn't work, unless you think carbon monoxide is a herb, or are wearing full Hazmat. Like some teachers. London is in much denial about its air pollution; in the East End child asthmatics are choking. But we must embrace it for a few days more; others have lost more in pandemic than an attachment to the convention that if we dine outside it should be in a flower-filled garden. Perhaps there are enchanted restaurant gardens in London, but I have never found one. I conclude that, outside fiction or aristocracy, they do not exist.

Instead, we have modish kerbside dining. I have always mocked people who bought flats with balconies on London's roads and sometimes are mad enough to sit on them and look happy, but a curio — a mistake — becomes a luxury with ease. It's a question of supply and demand: you know that better than I. Just now, the only restaurant tables available are out of doors; and so, just by existing, they become desirable.

*I think people
don't really
understand
the Blitz spirit,
which was
about bombs
and not salad*

But are they? It's funny to watch people eating under broileries with water in their socks and invoking the Blitz spirit — increasingly I think people don't really understand the Blitz spirit, which was about bombs and not salad. Restaurant marketing is as skilful as ever — nothing destroys advertising, and it never will — and I am glad. They will need it as they rise from the calamity. But I am increasingly convinced that outdoor dining is unpleasant, especially if it has pretensions, and expensive restaurants have to have pretensions because they are not selling food, but self-worth, self-deception and love.

Take 28-50, a restaurant on Marylebone Lane. I like this lane, just north of Wigmore Street; it follows an irregular path and includes a 167-year-old hardware shop — David Penton & Son — which pre-dates Selfridges by half a century. Do buy a broom there. 28-50 is a 'wine workshop and kitchen' though this description makes it sound more exhausting than it is. I like this kind of restaurant, though it



'It's such a lovely day we thought we'd eat outside.'

These common words are more of a problem than longer, rarer words such as *accommodate*, *cemetery* and *separate*. To make matters worse, online spell-checkers often turn *as into it's*. This is a pity, as the distinction between *as* and *it's* is a shibboleth: a criterion for judging whether a writer is halfway literate. In English, spelling is still taken as an indicator of education and intelligence, like imperial examinations in the Ming dynasty. *Its* has a fairly recent history. The third-person neuter possessive was *his* until

More mysterious to me is the common spelling of *chose* for the present tense of *choose*. I suppose it is a mix-up with *lose*, which itself becomes jumbled with *loose*.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Its and it's

An item on the BBC news site didn't mean what it said: 'The latest move is part of a wider crackdown by China to reign in the country's fast-growing tech platforms.' China may wish long to reign over us, but in this case it wanted to *rein in* activity.

It wasn't that the author didn't know the difference between a horse's *rein* and a monarch's *reign*. But the moribund metaphor of *reigning in* allowed a homophone to sneak in. If there was a spell-checker on the author's computer, it would have let it through.

I find that a very common spelling mistake is *lead* in

is not for me: it is transient, dramatic and necessary. It is all windows; there are bubble-pink chairs below upturned wine glasses; every surface is polished. The food exists to accompany the wine — it has a notable wine list — and not the other way round. All of this is superb if you are under 30, or an alcoholic of any age, or indoors. But on the lane itself, where we sit on slender chairs and at a slender table (the transience is explicit), it is dismal. I wonder at the peculiar greyness of the road — every grey here — and at what chime in late capitalism we began to bicker over tables in the street.

As consolation, we order almost everything, and it taints us because it is made to be eaten in meadows: a vast plate of cheese and charcuterie; artichoke tempura; truffle arancini; burrata; ham hock terrine; fries. In no restaurant I have yet encountered can you shout: I want a meadow. None of this skilful, pretty food can detract from the fact that we are, at this point in history, sitting in a street between two of the most polluted roads in a great city, trying to have what we had before, failing, and so taking the remnants. It is mad, expensive camping; here, it is for the congenitally shy. I love it for its hope, and despise it for its greed.

I would rather eat a bacon sandwich and a Curry Wurst on a haysack; perhaps the flight to the countryside indicates that now everyone would. But this, too, is transient and that is apt for Marylebone, a space between two roads; the end is coming.

28-50, 15-17 Marylebone Lane, London, W1U 2NE, tel: 020 7486 7922.

the 16th century. For 100 years or so, the spellings *is* or *it's* were equally tolerated. Shakespeare's printer for the First Folio (1623) used an apostrophe in *Henry VI (Part 2)*: 'The Cradle-habe, / Dying with mothers dugs betweene it's lips.' He was just as ready not to use an apostrophe for *mother's*. The apostrophe originally indicated a missing letter. Unlike *it's* for *its*, *it's* never had a lost vowel to indicate. Since predictive text programs so often guess what we are about to type, it is annoying when they try to insert errors into what we have got right on our own.

— Dot Wordsworth

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